CONNECTING THE CHURCH TO THE COMMUNITY THROUGH ADVOCACY AND SOCIAL JUSTICE

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A FINAL PROJECT SUBMITTED TO
THE DOCTORAL STUDIES COMMITTEE
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF MINISTRY

UNITED THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY
Dayton, Ohio
May 2017

United Theological Seminary
Dayton, OH

Faculty Approval Page
Doctor of Ministry Final Project

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ABSTRACT

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The context is Wesley Temple African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church located in Akron, Ohio. The purpose of the project was to create a model of ministry using advocacy and social justice themes to connect the church to the community. The hypothesis was that if the church provides ministries that meet the physical, social and spiritual needs of the community an effective connection is made between the church and the community that allows the church and the community to experience growth. The methodology was qualitative and the instruments used were surveys, interviews, Bible study and sermon series over a four-week period.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like thank my wife Shannon D. Tyler and our children Charles Jr., Aaron and Morgan for their love, support and understanding. The doctoral journey required a great sacrifice but it was a sacrifice for our entire family. I would also like to thank my mentors Dr. Lester McCorn and Dr. Jamison Hunter. Your support and guidance was invaluable. I am thankful for the support the Gardner Taylor Scholars. I am thankful for Rev. Kenneth York my peer associate, Mrs. Aria Campbell and Mr. Albert Fitzpatrick my context associates, Dr. Audie Simon, and Dr. William King my professional associates I would like to thank Bishop Marshall H. Strickland for telling me that I needed to be seminary trained. I would also like to thank Bishop Nathaniel Jarrett, Bishop Louis Hunter, and Bishop W. Darin Moore who encouraged me during the journey and for encouraging educational excellence. I am very thankful for the Wesley Temple A.M.E. Zion Church and the Akron District of the A.M.E. Zion Church Ohio Annual Conference. I thank God for giving me strength for the journey.

DEDICATION

I dedicate this work to my wife Shannon and our children and to my mother Elouise Jamison, my late grandmother Louvester Tyler-Gilmore. My sister Richardine Tyler-Isaac, my late uncle Louis Gilmore, Sr., my great Aunt Rosa Tyler-Clemons and all of my family and friends back home in Norway, South Carolina that has always prayed for me, encouraged me, and supported me. I am super proud to be from Norway, South Carolina.

INTRODUCTION

I have the privilege of serving as the pastor of Wesley Temple African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church in Akron, Ohio. Wesley Temple is a middle-class church located in the heart of the inner-city near downtown Akron. The church building will hold nearly five hundred people but the average attendance is less than one hundred weekly. Most of the members are well educated, and are well off financially. They are nice people who support many causes in the community by making financial contributions. Many of the members holds membership in organizations for the educated and the privilege. The major focus of the membership tends to be on the members of the church. Most of the time and energy is spent on the people the church wants to keep but not enough time is spent on the people the church needs to reach.

In addition, to serving as the pastor of Wesley Temple Church, I serve as the district presiding elder for the Akron District of the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church. As the district elder, I supervise other pastors and churches and offer training and support. There are times when I visit other churches on my district on Sunday mornings or during other ministry activities. What I have learned that there are not one church out of the nine churches on my district that sees a hundred or more people on a Sunday morning. It has been said that the average mainline church sees less than a hundred people on Sunday morning and that the average membership is under two hundred.

In a December 2015 article on www.churchleaders.com it was reported that less than twenty percent of Americans regularly attend church.[1] Another study published in 2005 in *The Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* by sociologists C. Kirk Hadaway and Penny Long Marler—known for their scholarly research on the church—backs up the findings. Their report reveals that the actual number of people worshipping each week is closer to 17.7 percent figure—52 million people instead of the pollster-reported 132 million (40 percent).

What I have learned serving as a pastor and as a district elder there, seems to be two problems that seem to prevent church growth. The one is interpersonal conflict and the other is the churches seems to have no connection to the communities where the churches are located. Wesley Temple and many of the other churches on my presiding elder district tend to work to meet denominational ministry goals and they tend to only focus on the members and the needs of the members in their local churches. There is not much attention focused on evangelism and outreach. There is not much talk or action around meeting the needs of the people of the community.

It can honestly be said that these are the best of times and the worst of times for the church. Many of the churches are empty or nearly empty each week. However, the churches are surrounded by unchurched people who are in need of support, family and resources. The church is surrounded by members who have not joined the church yet. The church has an opportunity to increase the number of people who attend church. If

[1] Kelly Shattuck, "7 Startling Facts: An Up Close Look at Church Attendance in America," ChurchLeaders.com, December 29, 2015, accessed February 16, 2017, http://churchleaders.com/pastors/pastor-articles/139575-7-startling-facts-an-up-close-look-at-church-attendance-in-america.html.

the church would intentionally build real relationships with the community where they are more people are likely to join the church.

The purpose of this project is to create a ministry model that will help Wesley Temple grow by connecting with the community. The project director led the leadership team and members in ministry activities that were designed to engage the community. The project was rooted in justice and advocacy. The church took every opportunity to expose systems of injustice in the community and worked with the community and the church to confront injustices. More than six sermons were preached and six to nine lessons taught on justice and advocacy. In the age of technology we spread the word about Wesley Temple willingness to fight for justice, equality and freedom.

During the project there were many individuals and organizations that visited and many acknowledge that they were not aware of many of the systems of injustice in our community. Others stated that they had been victims of the system but did not know where to get help. During one of the Democratic Party meetings where they were electing officers for the party executive committee a group of individuals showed up with the project director. When the party took nominations for officers from the floor the project director and another member from the community were nominated for two offices. The party was surprised and did what was necessary to make sure neither African American was elected to the executive committee. The project director challenged the racism and injustice publicly and the debate made the front page of the local newspaper.

On another occasion when the county executor died and the Democratic Party wanted to run a white lady for the seat one of the first things the party did was to engage

the black pastors. They sent out an invitation to the pastors inviting them to attend a free lunch meeting with their candidate. At that meeting most of the black pastors were in an agreement with the party leadership even though that meant voting against their own interest. I spoke up and out about how the party never selects African Americans to run for major offices. I asked the candidate to explain why is it that the party never runs any blacks for judge. I asked her to explain why is it that the prosecutor's office only has two black criminal prosecutors out of a staff of nearly forty criminal prosecutors. While most of the black pastors knew that I was right they remained silent and agreed to lead their people to vote against their interest.

Meetings such as the ones mention above was important to this project. They helped to give the project director access to the people in the community and the opportunity to show that Wesley Temple Church and its pastor are willing to fight with and fight for the poor. As a result of the advocacy publicly for the poor many of the community started staying pastor you should run for judge. We will support you. Others begin to ask what do I need to do to become a party precinct committee member and how do I run for school board. One of the most exciting things that is during the project eight new people joined the church.

We started out with the intent to help and teach our neighbors. God added an interesting twist. One of the women who joined our church became very active in our church and our Sunday school. She began to teach us about the hidden language of the poor. She taught us how the hidden language of the middle class sounds to the poor. One Sunday in Sunday school she said that she almost did not come to church because she did not have anything red to wear. The week before in service it was announced that

the women would be wearing red in observance of "Go Red' for women's health. When the announcement was read we failed to consider that the women who were new members may not have anything red to wear. We failed to consider that at least ten women visit our church on a weekly basis from the shelter. Instead of allowing our language and behavior to disconnect her from our church and become a barrier she taught us the importance of not disconnecting new members from the church.

Becoming a church that loves their neighbor as they love themselves and a church that fight with and for the poor Wesley Temple experienced growth. Wesley Temple taking in eight new members during the project was more than the number of new members that was taken in the prior twelve months. With God continued help and as Wesley Temple continue to focus on working with the least of these the church will continue to experience growth.

CHAPTER ONE

MINISTRY FOCUS

On June 26, 2013, I was appointed as pastor of the Wesley Temple African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church. Prior to having been appointed as pastor of the Wesley Temple Church, I served as the pastor of the St. Luke African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church in New Castle, Pennsylvania, the Beth-El African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church in Cleveland, Ohio and the First African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church in Columbus, Ohio. I answered my call to the preaching ministry while a member of the Wesley Temple Church in November of 1998. After answering my call I served on staff as a local preacher and my wife and I worked with the youth ministry.

While serving on staff as a local preacher my involvement with the administrative side of the church was very minimum. I did not have any day-to-day responsibilities and my involvement was limited to participating in the morning worship service, serving as the director of youth and preaching on an as needed bases. From an outward perspective the general operation of the church appeared in tact. People often reflected on the days when the church reached its capacity on Sunday morning including the balcony. They reflected on the financial status of the church in surplus, including Certificates of Deposits (CD) and other financial resources. The people talked about the decrease in membership, but failed to discussed methods of reaching and attracting new people.

Although the church provided activities for children and youth they were always activities for the children that were actively engaged in the ministry and did not incorporate the need for outreach. There were never any activities planned to attract children and youth from the community. Often activities were planned to provide for the homeless shelter that was near the church. The members of the church would contribute money and during the Christmas season they would contribute toys. However, not many members were actively engaged in the planned activity. Their commitment to the poor seemed limited to providing resources but not time or interaction.

Another thing that I learned while serving as a local preacher at the Wesley Temple Church is that the majority of the membership involvement was limited to Sunday morning worship. The members did not stay for Sunday afternoon programs and they did not come back during the week for Bible study or other ministry activities that took place during the week. The same faithful few showed up for Sunday school. Many of the persons who served as leaders in the local church drop their children and grandchildren off as they travel to the churches that they attended. I think that everyone was aware that there were things and attitudes that needed to change but not many people were willing to change or be a part of the change.

Currently as pastor of Wesley Temple Church, I learned that the membership had drastically declined, was in a financial crisis and that the church was not connected to the community. Wesley Temple is a very conservative middle class Methodist church that is steeped in tradition. The average age of the membership is sixty-five years old. The average weekly attendance is between ninety and one hundred and twenty members. There are approximately ten active members between the age of forty and fifty years old,

approximately two members between the age of twenty-one to thirty-nine and approximately fifteen members between the age of zero and twenty. The average age of the remaining members is sixty-seven. One member is one hundred and one and another member is one hundred.

Although I serve as the pastor of Wesley Temple Church, I am also a licensed practicing attorney in the state of Ohio. It is very difficult to balance serving a congregation that requires a full-time pastor and running a law practice, while being very active in the life of my children. Days that I contemplate serving the church full-time and not practicing law I am reminded that I am an itinerant preacher with three young children that my wife and I are responsible for raising and providing for. Having watched itinerant preachers left out by the leadership and not being able to provide for their family makes it difficult for me to leave my law practice. In addition, the church does not have a retirement plan and I must prepare for retirement in my young days. Despite these challenges, Wesley Temple Church is in need of a full-time pastor.

Another thing that the Wesley Temple Church need is a fresh start. The average age of the membership is sixty-five years old. The director of evangelism and outreach is an ordained minister who is seventy-eight years old. She is a retired pastor of a mission church. The church that she once served as pastor had an average membership of seven and closed June of 2014. The evangelism and outreach that she leads her committee to do, take place at local nursing homes. An ordained minister is currently leading the Christian Education department is a young woman who is approximately forty-four years old. Prior to serving at our church she served as the director of discipleship at a larger congregation in Suwannee, Georgia. In addition to serving as our Christian Education

Director she serves as a supply pastor for a church that has five members. The Christian Education Director teaches children's church once a month and provides other activities for the children and youth of our church.

Prior to our current Christian Education Director, a seventy-five year old woman led the Christian education department. The seventy-five-year-old lady previously served as the Christian Education Director under a previous pastor Rev. Jackson. Under Rev. Jackson the Christian Education Director was disrespectful to leadership. She would disrespect leadership and would encourage the staff to do the same. The Christian education department was a church within a church. Rev. Jackson removed the Christian Education Director and appointed a minister. The minister led the Christian education department for a few years before being appointed to pastor another church. When the minister departed, Rev. Jackson appointed Mrs. James to lead the Christian education department. Under Mrs. James the ministry grew and there were many children and youth active within the Christian education department. In 2009, Rev. Jackson departed as pastor of the church. Pastor Rev. Spann succeeded Rev. Jackson as pastor. When Rev. Spann became the new pastor he held meetings with members and groups. The seventy-five-year old lady who had been removed as the Christian Education Director under Rev. Jackson was appointed the new Christian Education Director. When I arrived as the new pastor in 2013 there were little or no children, youth or young adults. The seventy-five-year old lady, Mrs. Green, had no ideas how to lead or grow the department and was still trying to use ideas and activities that she had used twenty years earlier. In July 2014, I made the decision to appoint the ordained minister as the Christian Education Director.

The missionary and missions department is led by a middle age lady who is very devoted to God and to the teachings of the church. Monthly meetings are held in conjunction with other missionaries of the church to plan activities that support the general missionary programs and activities that support our local community. The missionary department raises more than three thousand dollars annually through their fundraising efforts. Unfortunately, all the money that they raised is sent to the general church missionary organization in the name of assessments. They are not able to use any of the money raised for local projects and activities. Their local activities includes serving in our hot meal program and other activities

The community benefits very little from any of the activities that are done by the clubs, boards and organizations of the Wesley Temple Church. When sincere efforts are made to make the church a missionary in the community the membership generally will not participate in large numbers, just a faithful few. Persons who were once leaders that were not selected to serve as leaders spend time trying to convince other members not to lead. Other members are disconnected from the church and the ministries that the church is attempting to provide. Generally, they may provide a donation but they will not provide any time or assist in any other way.

Since my arrival as pastor of the Wesley Temple Church, the outreach efforts within the community have been limited. In September 2013 we participated in the National Back to Church Sunday. Three weeks were spent on advertising and marketing by distributing literature to the community. A worship service was planned with a band and a big cookout in the park. Our outreach and marketing campaign was very successful. There were approximately 300 people in the Sunday morning worship

service. In the park after service, more than 400 people were in attendance. However, the majority of the members from our church did not remain after service for the fellowship. There were other times that we successfully invited people to church but the members of our church failed to make them feel welcome and usually will not remain after church to interact with persons who visit.

Wesley Temple has always been a great church in a great neighborhood that is centrally located near the downtown area. In reviewing the church's rich history and the progression since its inception, it's amazing and leaves one bewildered at its progress. What caused Wesley Temple to decline in its membership? When did Wesley Temple become so focused on each other more than their focus being on God? Wesley Temple must begin to focus on the needs of the community. Wesley Temple must be willing to become a missionary in the community. The church survival is dependent on community engagement. In comparing the rich heritage and the current status, the question becomes, how do we develop strategies to engage the community and the church?

How do we get Wesley Temple to move away from being inward focused and to become more concern about the poor and oppressed members of the community? When I was the pastor of Frist African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church in Columbus, Ohio I was able to successfully lead the congregation in community engagement. We purchased the Thirty Day Church Challenge for Outreach.com. The Thirty Day Church Challenge encouraged members to attend all church services for thirty day. The members were encouraged to give financially for thirty days. They were encouraged to join a small group at the church and to attend small group meetings and Bible study for thirty days.

The Thirty Day Church Challenge provided the energy the church needed to move in a new direction. We invited our family and our friends to join the challenge. We posted on our website the activities of the challenge and invited persons who visited our web site to visit our church and to join the challenge. We changed our worship style to incorporate some contemporary worship into our traditional worship style. We encouraged the members to dress down. During the challenge we had many un-churched members of the community to visit our church and some joined.

In addition to the changes we made to our worship service we started a community lunch program. The community lunch program was another successful community engagement effort. It provided the church an opportunity to carry out the biblical mandate to care for the poor and the oppressed in the community and it allowed us to have intentional and personal contact with the members of the community. As a result of the challenge and the congregational buy-in we were successful in connecting the local church to the community. Our outreach efforts and evangelism increased. The giving increased as did the attendance. In an effort to improve the community engagement efforts of Wesley Temple Church many of the efforts that I used as pastor of First African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church will be used.

When I was a graduate student at the University of Akron in the Department of Public Administration, one of classes required the students to design a community survey and to go door to door in the community to learn about the persons who lived in the community to identify their needs. Part of the project was to get the community involved in the political process and to help them bring about the change that they wanted to see in the community. As graduate students we were able to engage the community in the

political process. We taught them how to organize and become members of committees in the community that were making decisions for and about them.

As we make sincere attempts at Wesley Temple to engage the community similar efforts will be used. We will create surveys so that we can learn what issues are important to the members of the community. We will use that information to help us design ministries and programs that would not only engage the community but will also meet the needs of the community. Just as we did as graduate students, others will come along side of the members of the community and become advocates for them and lead social justice efforts.

The pastor and leaders of Wesley Temple will spend more time focusing on outreach and community engagement and less time focusing on lack of support in the area of finance. We will encourage more volunteerism, and encourage the members to embrace the change that is necessary to engage the community and to grow the church. We too often lose focus on the fact that we are the church (the people) not the building. When we begin to look inward at ourselves, our attitudes, our motives, we should also make sure that our commitment is to God and not to a building. Many of the members refuse to ask: am I one of those that constantly complain about the way things are and never lift a finger to help, support, or change the negative into a positive or do we go around like the Ebola virus infecting others with our negative words looking for somebody to agree with us instead of seeking a solution or an alternative method that will work for all. Others do not realize that it's not about titles, financial status, or the circle of friends; it is all about Jesus and the finished work on the cross. Jesus paid it all so that all mankind could have access to him. We cannot offer the salvation of Jesus when we

have put our work above his. The question for the Wesley Temple Church: is do we continue on a destructive path or do we do a turn around and try to fix that which is wrong? When we begin to see that we are destroying our heritage, history, legacy and the future of a great ministry, perhaps then we may see a need for change.

The greatest need for change that Wesley Temple Church has is to become more outward focus. In reflecting on the contextual analysis, it was discovered that the church does not have a history or foundation for outreach and evangelism. The church has always been a middle class church that focuses only on the needs of persons who are members of the church. After a year and a half as serving as the pastor of Wesley Temple Matthew 9:17 is reflective of the church which states, "And no one puts new wine into old wineskins. For the old skins would burst from the pressure, spilling the wine and ruining the skins. New wine is stored in new wineskins so that both are preserved." Historically, the two former pastors had worked to get the church involved in ministering to the community but had very little success. There was great resistance to change, which continues to exist today.

With a master's in education administration and a master's in public administration, I served on a school board, the largest head start board in the State of Ohio and had the privilege of starting and running my own business. Through my many educational and professional experiences, I have gained the necessary skills to lead the effort for a major transformation at the Wesley Temple Church. We face many struggles at Wesley Temple. Some of our struggles are spiritual, financial, and some are self-inflicting. The many struggles that I have encountered in life prepared me to deal with

the challenges that we face. Throughout my life I started over many times and some of the affiliated organizations had to start over as well.

Based on my experience, education and guidance of the Holy Spirit, it is my belief that Wesley Temple Church must spend serious time working on community engagement. Therefore, the proposed project is about connecting Wesley Temple African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church to the community through advocacy and social justice. In other words we will become advocates for the poor and oppressed of the community. We will begin to speak truth to power. We will create programs and strategies to help the unemployed and the under employed. We will make our church building a central location for community meetings and gatherings.

The church is located in a good area. Unfortunately, the members of the church do not have a desire to be the church. Therefore, we must change. Over the last eighteen months there are people who have abandon the church. There are others who have held their finances because they have no desire to see the church become a missionary in the community. Although things seem bad I believe there is a remnant that is willing to join the movement of God.

I believe another need of Wesley Temple is love. We need to learn to love one another as we love ourselves. We must also learn to love the members of the community who do not look like us. We need to work on becoming our brother's keeper. We need God to give us a love and a heart for the community and the people that he has called us to serve. Through my project I desire to learn what it takes to grow a church that has potential but seems to have very low desire to grow or change. I am hoping that the people will say "let us build us a city" the new Wesley Temple, whose top may reach into

heaven, and let us make a name for ourselves, lest we be scattered abroad upon the earth. I believe that Wesley Temple has some great people but we must refocus on God and try to become a missionary in our community. We must resist the temptation to exalt ourselves above the Most High God?

In Genesis Chapter 11, verse 6, "The Lord said, behold the people is one. They all have one language, and this that they began to do; and now nothing will be restrained from them, which they imagined to do." Wesley Temple can offer great opportunities for the young, the old, and everyone in between. Wesley Temple can be a great thriving, prosperous and growing ministry once again. How do we move forward and not keep looking back at yesteryear. When the people of God say to themselves, I won't let nothing separate me from the love of God, because in Him I live, in Him I move, in Him I have my being, (I am who I am because of who He has made me, I did nothing to earn who I am in him). God must be our number one focus. We must have a hunger for righteousness, and not follow those that complain, but say that, "I am going to follow Jesus." Am I willing to help change the current conditions to a healthy and productive church? When God saw them working together he said there is nothing that they can imagine that they can't do together as a team. We are saved to serve, let's get our focus back on the salvation of others rather than on our programs and social hour.

Wesley Temple Church is in walking distance to the campus of the University of Akron. There are more than twenty thousand students that attend the university. However, not one student from the university attends our church. In addition, we have not invited the students to attend our church. There are times when students visit our church but we offer nothing to encourage them to come back. My project will utilize the

campus as a source of outreach, evangelism and church growth. We will build ministries that will meet the needs of college students and professionals who work at the university. In addition, we will build ministries that will attract young families. My project with God's help will help Wesley Temple become the church that God has called it to be and a church that is concerned for the people.

CHAPTER TWO

BIBLICAL FOUNDATIONS

When choosing a biblical text, the desire was to find a passage that would address the problem of the church failure to seek justice for the poor. Far too many churches are replacing social justice ministries with feel good ministries. Psalm eighty-two was the text selected. The major question of the passage was, "Will you seek justice for the poor?" The question is important due to personal reasons of experiencing poverty and the inability to voice your concerns and not having anyone else who is willing to speak up for you.

Further, question is important because as an attorney by training, the law office web site says to "Seek Justice For All," which is a personal concept and belief that is practiced. Everyone should be treated with dignity and respect. In my profession it is often said that justice is not cheap. Unfortunately that is a true statement. Often times poor people go to prison not because they are guilty but because they are poor and could not afford good legal representation.

The question of will you seek justice for the poor is important because there are 2103 verses of scripture pertaining to the poor. In the New Testament selected scripture Matthew 25:36-40 it states:

> "I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.' Then the righteous will answer him, saying, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? And when did

> we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? And when did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?' And the King will answer them, 'Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me." This is at the heart of the Gospel. Why is it that we have seemed to have forgotten this? Why isn't the church leading this movement for justice for the poor?

In reviewing Facebook and other social media outlets there are many calls for prayer calls and prayer meetings, Bible studies and Bible readings, revival, healing, evangelism, worship, and so on. All of the named ministry activities are good and they are necessary but they are not a substitute for justice and advocacy for the poor. The most that many churches are willing to do for the poor is pray for them. However, James 2:15-16 says "A brother or sister in Christ night need clothes or might need food. And you say to him, "God be with you! I hope you stay warm and get plenty to eat." You say this, but you do not give that person the things he needs. Unless you help him, your words are worth nothing."

There is a direct correlation between beliefs and actions in response to the needs of people. First John 3:16-17 says,

> This is how we know what real love is: Jesus gave his life for us. So we should give our lives for our brothers. Suppose a believer is rich enough to have all that he needs. He sees his brother in Christ who is poor and does not have what he needs. What if the believer does not help the poor brother? Then the believer does not have God's love in his heart.

Old Testament

The Eighty-Second Psalm states:

> God standeth in the congregation of the mighty; he judgeth among the gods. How long will ye judge unjustly, and accept the persons of the wicked? Selah. Defend the poor and fatherless: do justice to the afflicted and needy. Deliver the poor and needy: rid them out of the hand of the wicked. They know not, neither will they understand; they walk on in darkness: all the foundations of the earth are

> out of course. I have said, Ye are gods; and all of you are children of the most High. But ye shall die like men, and fall like one of the princes. 8 Arise, O God, judge the earth: for thou shalt inherit all nations.

Psalm the eighty-second chapter is one of the most overtly mythological texts in scripture, which in its form and content seems to touch base hardly at all with anything familiar to most persons in the community of faith. It has its setting in the divine council or the heavenly assembly, a mythological motif common to the religious world of the ancient Near East, in which the gods gather together as a political or judicial assembly or on occasion as a military entourage, often if not usually, under the direction or leadership of one of the high gods.[1]

Psalm eighty-two is, in effect, a brief dramatic scene in the affairs of the assembly of the gods. In this scene Elohim, God, stands up (v. 1) in the midst of the gods (Elohim), and turning the divine council into a judicial court, proceeds to as a judge against the other gods. Elohim first utters a series of indictments against the gods that are composed both of accusations about misconduct (v. 2) and commands that define and call for proper divine conduct (cc. 3-4). The powerless or incompetence of these gods to carry out their responsibility for ensuring justice is described in verse five in language reminiscent of the description in Isaiah 40-55 of the nothingness of the idols that have no capacity to see or know or discern anything, and the earthshaking effect of this failure or incompetence is disclosed.

The final act of judgment by Elohim is a sentence pronounced against all the other gods, which is to the effect that those who are gods shall die like mortals (v. 6), those who are eternally exalted in their divine status shall now be brought low, as is eventually

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[1] E. T. Mullen Jr., *The Assembly of the Gods: The Divine Council in Canaanite and Early Hebrew Literature* (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1980).

the case with every human rule (v. 7). At the conclusion of the Psalm, the psalmist calls for Elohim, God, to rise up and judge the earth, claiming as an inheritance or permanent possession all the nations whose gods are now eliminated from the scene. In the midst of this assembly of the gods, the Lord rises and in explicit fashion condemns all the other deities to death. The immortals are condemned to the fate of mortality and merit comparison with human beings and not God. In this sense the gods are clearly and permanently negated.

Only the Lord of Israel can claim the just rule (which is the meaning of "judge the earth" in v. 8) of all the earth. Only God, Elohim, has any power in the divine realm. The Gods are condemned to death for their failure to carry out justice in the human realm, a justice that is particularly characterized by protecting and maintaining the right of the weak and powerless members of the community as represented especially to the widow, the orphan, the poor, and the oppressed. The reference is to those persons who on their own do not have the capacity to claim their own place and are vulnerable to those with wealth and power, those who can become the wicked as they oppress and overwhelm the weak for their own enhancement. The courts and the marketplace are first in view in God's indictment of what is wrong and call for what is "right" (v. 3b), but all the structures of society small or large are in view when the issue of divine governance of the human realm is at stake.

The purpose or function of Psalm eighty-two is clear. However, there is much debate about the characters in the psalm. The text is short but is somewhat mythological. While some scholars have advocated that the gods that are being punished for not

administering justice and caring for the poor were human judges. Other scholars have argued that they were fallen angels and others have argued that they were lesser gods. Psalm eighty-two is divided into five sections. Psalm 82:1 identifies the setting as the divine assembly.[2] In Psalm 82:2-4 indicates that the gods are judged for their failure to be good stewards over the nations. The condition of the poor and the afflicted evidenced the poor stewardship and neglect of the gods and is connected to the maintenance of order in the earthly realms. God condemns the lesser gods for socio-political conditions on earth. Psalm 82:5 talks about the lack of understanding and walking in darkness shaking the foundations of the earth. In Psalm 82:6-7 judgment is passed and the gods are condemned to death. In Psalm 82:8 God is called upon to rise up and take over rule of all the nations.

The focus of Psalm eighty-two is in the heavenly realms, where the author is reporting on the course and outcome of a judgment scene involving Yhwh and the god of the nations. The context is a divine assembly.[3] In the divine assembly God pronounce judgment on the lesser gods for their failure to carry out their responsibilities as it relates to the poor and the orphans. According to verse one God, stands up in the midst of the gods, and proceeds as if he is holding court as he act as a judge against the other gods. In verse two God issues indictments against the gods for their negligence and misconduct. After issuing indictments God instructs and challenge the gods to do the right thing. He challenged them to seek justice for the poor, the fatherless and the needy. He challenged them to take the poor out of the hands of the wicked.

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[2] David Bokovoy, "Invoking the Council as Witness in Amos 3:13," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 127, no. 1 (2008): 37-51.

[3] Min Suc Kee, "The Heavenly Council and Its Type-Scene," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 31, no. 3 (2007): 259-273.

The powerlessness or incompetence of these gods to carry out their responsibility for ensuring justice is described in verse five in language reminiscent of the description in Isaiah 40-55 of the nothingness of the idols that have no capacity to see or know or discern anything, and the earthshaking effect of this failure or incompetence is disclosed. The final act of judgment by God is a sentence pronounced against all the other gods, which is to the effect that those who are gods shall die like mortals (v.6), those who are eternally exalted in their divine status shall now be brought low, as is eventually the case with every human rule (v.7). At the conclusion, God is asked to rise up and judge the earth, claiming as an inheritance or permanent possession all the nations whose gods are now eliminated from the scene.

In the divine assembly the other gods are condemned to death for their failure to carry out justice in the human realm, a justice that is particularly characterized by protecting and maintaining the rights of the weak and powerless members of the community as represented especially in the widow, the orphan, the poor, the oppressed and those persons who on their own do not have the capacity to claim their own place and are vulnerable to those with wealth and power, those who can become the wicked as they oppress and overwhelm the weak for their own enhancement. The courts and the marketplace are first in view in God's indictment of what is wrong and call for what is "right" (v.3b), but all the structures of society small or large are in view when the issue of divine governance of the human realm is at stake.

How much does justice in human society matter? Israel never gave a clearer or more radical answer to that question, even in the strongest words of Amos and Jeremiah, Isaiah and Micah, than in this Psalm. Justice is the cornerstone of the universe. The

notion that justice matters was not a discovery of Israel's religion but the intensity and centrality of righteousness and justice are a particular touchstone of that tradition, which has never been diminished. Justice in the human realm was a concern of all near Eastern religions, but in Psalm eighty-two the cosmic realm also depends upon justice in the social order. Indeed the very foundations of the cosmic order are shaken in the presence of injustice. The cosmos, the universe, the divine world depends upon the maintenance of justice in the human community, not only in Israel's midst but in all communities. When justice is not maintained, then the very foundations of the earth are shaken, the world threatens to fall apart into chaos once more. That is how much justice matters. It is not just one of the virtues. It is not even a high ethical demand. Justice is the issue on which the very claims of deity are settled. Justice, just rule, is that central activity by which God is God. Without it the very universe cannot survive.

Our God – the only true and living God – is a God of perfect justice. Therefore, when He created man in His image, he also implanted an instinctive need, even hunger, for justice. In nearly every society, some legal system of justice exists but as with all human works, some systems are better than others, and each is flawed to a certain degree. In oppressive nations and societies, little true justice exits. Other societies strive diligently to provide justice for all.

Many authorities take their responsibility to execute justice seriously. Some however, abuse the power that has been entrusted to them. Injustice is a universal problem, one that will continue until Jesus Christ returns to earth and establishes a perfect government. Psalm eighty-two was written by Asaph to confront Israel's unjust judges. He is the speaker at the psalm's beginning and ending (v. 1, 8). In between, God is the

speaker (vv.2-7). God charges Israel's crooked magistrates with judging unjustly, commands them to protect the helpless, and condemns them for their arrogant perversion of his laws. What God said to those corrupt officials applies to those in every age and every place who have been ordained by Him to administer, interpret, and enforce His righteous laws.

God is the Supreme Judge of the entire universe. He gave the basic laws that are always to govern human societies (Is. 33:22). These laws were based on his perfect righteousness and justice, and he delegated their administration and enforcement to human rulers (De. 16:18-20; Ro. 13:1-6). Law enforcement personnel and judges are God's representatives here on earth. As his ordained authorities, they must answer to God for their execution of justice according to his laws.

The psalmists begin by reminding us of a very significant fact: there is a greater court than our earthly halls of justice. The "congregation of the mighty" is heaven's court. It is God's courtroom where he will judge all people. This includes all earthly authorities as well. Asaph declared that God judges among the gods. Obviously, the use of the word gods is unusual, making it the subject of much discussion because it is the Hebrew word elohim, it is translated as gods in the King James Version (KJV) and a number of other Bible versions. While elohim usually refers to the one true God, it is sometimes used of the false gods of pagans and also of angels. Occasionally in scripture, elohim is used of human judges, and that is the case here (Ex 21:6; 22:8-9).

According to Warren Wiersbe the "gods" (vv. 1-6) are not the false gods of the heathen, for such nonexistent gods are not Jehovah's judicial representatives on earth. Nor are these "gods" the holy angels, for angels cannot die (v. 7). These "gods" (elohim)

are people who have been given the awesome responsibility of representing the Lord on earth and interpreting and applying his Law (Ex. 18:13-17; 21:6; Deut. 16:18-20; 17:2-13; 19:15-20; 21; 2).[4] Israel's judges failed miserably in their responsibility to fairly apply God's laws to society. God's charge against them was straightforward: they were guilty of gross injustice. God condemned their abuse of power by asking them how long they would continue to pervert justice.

With no thought of God and no regard for justice, Israel's corrupt judges handed down unjust decisions. They likely put their personal interests before the administration of justice. Whether due to bribery, seeking favor with certain people, seeking a higher position or some other selfish motive, these officials failed to properly carry out the law in their courtrooms. Their rulings were unfair and unethical. Israel's crooked judges "accepted the persons of the wicked." That is they showed favoritism to criminals, allowing them to get away with their unlawful deeds. The verses that follow indicate that these dishonest authorities had perverted justice by favoring the rich and powerful at the expense of the poor (vv.3-4). This was a flagrant violation of God's holy laws (Le.19:15; De. 1:17; 16:19).

In many ways, the world is no different today than it has ever been. Good and evil still exist in every society. Many judges carry out their duties with integrity and honor but sadly some do not. Injustice and partiality do exist. The wealthy, the powerful, political figures, celebrities, and even physically attractive people frequently have the scales of justice tipped in their favor by partial, crooked officials. People are often discriminated against because of their social or financial status, race, religion, or

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[4] Warren W. Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: David C. Cook, 2008).

gender. The corruption of Israel's judges filled God with righteous indignation. Therefore, God sharply called them back to their sacred duty: to secure justice for all.

God-ordained authorities are charged to defend the cause of justice and maintain the rights of all people especially those who cannot defend themselves. The text lifts up that we are to defend the poor, the fatherless, the afflicted and the needy. It us usually the disadvantaged of society who do not receive justice, and this was the case in Israel. However, God's law required the courts to disregard a person's social and financial status. Judges were commanded not to discriminate at all, whether against the poor or against the wealthy (Le. 19:15). God boldly ordered Israel's authorities to deliver or rescue the helpless and needy from their wicked oppressors. Judges were to be the champions of the poor and afflicted. When greedy, wicked people took advantage of them, judges were commanded to rise to their defense. They were to stop the wicked from exploiting them.

Judges need to recognize and embrace their sacred duty as God, the Supreme Judge, has defined it. They are the protectors of those who do not have the means or ability to protect themselves. They are to stand for those who cannot stand for themselves. Judges are duty-bound to rescue the abused from their abusers and the exploited from those who take advantage of them. They should see themselves as God sees them, as champions of the afflicted and helpless. "And the King shall answer and say unto them, Verily I say unto you, inasmuch as you have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me" (Mt 25:40).

After laying out the charges against Israel's evil judges, God announced His condemnation of them because they willfully ignored his laws and despised their sacred

responsibility, they would face his fierce judgment. God stated that Israel's wicked judges did not know or understand the importance of the truth. Know *"yada"* means to know personally, to know by experience. To understand "biyn" is to perceive or discern. In other words, God was saying that fairness, righteousness, and justice were foreign concepts to Israel's dishonest officials. They willfully ignored how vital these virtues are to a civil society and to the citizens whose quality of life depends on them.

Instead of opening their eyes to the light of God's truth and changing their ways, Israel's authorities continued to walk in darkness of their corruption. As a result, the foundations of the earth were shaken. A peaceful and civil society is built on God's laws. When his principles are violated, chaos erupts. The unjust rulings of these crooked judges had shaken society to its very core. God emphatically stated that these judges' authority came directly from him: I have said, you are gods. By referring to them as gods (elohim), God was not only emphasizing the power they exercised, but also that they were his representatives on earth. They had been entrusted with the awesome responsibility of exercising justice on his behalf.

In addition, God addressed them as "children of the most High." Donald M. Williams explains that, "the judges are sons by appointment, not by nature, since they are called to execute God's will and character. This concept is based on the calling in Israel of faithful sons to execute the will and character of the father."[5] Yet they abused the office.

Psalm eighty-two closes with an appeal to God from the psalmist. Asaph called on God to arise and judge the earth – to stop the world's corrupt judges by executing

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[5] Donald M. Williams, *The Preacher's Commentary: Psalms 73-150*, ed. Lloyd J. Ogilvie (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1987), 93.

justice himself. "Thou shalt inherit all nations" points to Jesus Christ, God's Son and the Savior of mankind. He will rule over all the earth for eternity. God has decreed that the nations of the earth are his inheritance (Ps.2:7-8). When Jesus returns, perfect justice will reign forevermore.

Psalm 82:1 is a focal point for the view that the tiers of the divine council collapsed in later Israelite religion: God has taken his place in the divine council; in the midst of the gods he holds judgment. S. Parker states that, while "there is no question that the occurrences of Elohim in verses 1 a, 8 refer (as usually in the Elohistic psalter) to Yahweh," and that "most scholars assume that God, that is Yahweh, is presiding over the divine council," Yahweh is actually just "one of the assembled gods under a presiding El or Elyon."[6] Parker supports his conclusion by arguing that noting that stand in 82:1 denotes prosecution, not presiding, in legal contexts.[7] Psalm eighty-two, depicts the high god El presiding over an assembly of his sons. Yahweh, one of those sons, accuses the others of injustice. His role is prosecutorial, not that of judge. That role belongs to El. The fact that Yahweh is standing, which means he is not the presiding deity, alerts us to Yahweh's inferior status.

Continuing with Parker's interpretation of Psalm eighty-two, the accusation that follows in verses two through five is uttered by Yahweh, the prosecutorial figure:

> How long will you judge unjustly and show partiality to the wicked? Selah. Give justice to the weak and the fatherless; maintain the right of the afflicted and the destitute. Rescue the weak and the needy; deliver them from the hand of the wicked. They have neither knowledge nor understanding, they weak about in darkness; all the foundations of the earth are shaken.

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[6] Simon B. Parker, "The Beginning of the Reign of God – Psalm 82 as Myth and Liturgy," *Review Biblique* 102, no. 4 (1995): 534-35.

[7] Parker, "The Beginning of the Reign of God," 536.

These charges are immediately followed by the judicial sentencing, also considered to come from Yahweh: I said, "You are gods, sons of the Most High, all of you; nevertheless, like men you shall die, and fall like any prince."[8]

To this point, Yahweh issues the charge and pronounces the sentence. No explanation is offered as to why, in the scene being created, the presumably seated El does not pronounce the sentence. In this reconstruction of the psalm, El apparently has no real function. He is supposed to be declaring the sentence, but the text does not have him doing so.

At this juncture, Yahweh takes the center stage again in the scene. Smith, whose interpretation is similar to Parker's, notes that, "[A] prophetic voice emerges in verse 8, calling for God (now called Elohim) to assume the role of judge over all the earth. Here Yahweh in effect is asked to assume the job of all the gods to rule their nations in addition to Israel."[9] Parker concurs that after Yahweh announces the fate of the gods, "the psalmist then balances this with an appeal to Yahweh to assume the governance of the world."[10] Psalm 82:8 reads: Arise, O God, judge the earth; for you shall inherit all the nations!

The themes which appear in other parts of Matthew's Gospel which most directly illumine Matthew 25:31-46 include the theological concepts of salvation history, mission, soteriology, and eschatology. Modern commentators who practice historical critical exegesis, who are primarily concerned with how the text was understood in its original setting, are content to keep this discussion within the boundaries of what may be

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[8] Parker, "The Beginning of the Reign of God," 539-40.

[9] Parker, "The Beginning of the Reign of God," 539-40.

[10] Parker, "The Beginning of the Reign of God," 546.

reasonably speculated concerning Matthew's own theological perspectives. Other commentators who do not limit their interest to the authorial intent of the text, may read Matthew 25:31-46 in the light of theological opinions which Matthew and his original readers may have never entertained. The following discussion about the theological context of Matthew 25:31-46 will primarily focus upon what Matthew may have believed about salvation history, mission, soteriology, and eschatology. All but the most radically post-modern interpreters still acknowledge Matthew's original intention for this text is at least a relevant issue.

"Salvation history" may be defined in the words of John P. Meier as "a schematic understanding of God's dealings with men that emphasizes continuity yet difference." The continuity is perceived by the eye of faith, which sees "one and the same God acting faithfully and consistently within the flow of human history."[11] The distinct periods of God's actions among men are marked by the different ways in which God acts at different times and the different ways in which man responds. According to Meier, all of the several periods of salvation history are only various stages of the one divine economy.[12] Salvation history is therefore a conceptualization of what God has done in history for the salvation of mankind. God's actions may be seen in both the critical turning points that demark the separate epochs of salvation history as well as in God's maintenance of his purpose in each epoch. In his work on the theology of the Christian mission, Andreas Kostenberger writes of the evangelical expectation to see in God's

[11] John P. Meier, *Law and History in Matthews Gospel*, (Rome, Italy: Biblical Inst. Press, 1976), 19-21.

[12] Meier, *Law and History*, 22.

written word an "underlying logic and unity in the biblical message" which is united in "one primary pervading purpose: the tracing of God's unfolding plan of redemption."[13]

Matthew's Gospel may be read with sensitivity to what Matthew may have thought about the critical turning points and epochs of God's redemptive work. The belief that Matthew's Gospel is consistent with itself leads to the confidence that what Matthew says about salvation history is compatible with the rest of Matthew's Gospel in whole and in part. This means that Matthew's portrayal of salvation history should illuminate Matthew's intention regarding the judgment of the sheep and goats in Matthew 25:31-46: Key Issues and Narrative Context.

New Testament

While a thorough textual analysis of Matt 25:31-46 is not possible for the purposes of this chapter, two interpretive issues emerge as particularly relevant. The first issue is the identity of the "least" (Matthew 25:40, 45): Are they the Christian poor, hungry, etc.? Or do they represent the disadvantaged among all humanity? The conclusions reached by interpreters on this question contribute to the text's function in subverting or possibly confirming insider and outsider categories. The second issue to be addressed is a shift of power and advantage that is suggested by the passage in its literary context. This is an issue that is not often directly addressed in commentaries but which nonetheless has implications for the question at hand.

A brief look at the placement of this scene within the narrative context of Matthew highlights the importance of the text. Matthew 25:31-46 is unique to Matthew

[13] Andreas J. Kostenberger and Peter T. O.'Brien, *Salvation to the End of the Earth: A Biblical Theology of Mission, New Studies in Biblical Theology*, vol. 11 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2001), 20.

and concludes the final of five major discourses of Jesus in that gospel (chs. 5-7, 10, 13, 18, 24-25), thus making it the last teaching pericope of Matthew's narrative. When, at the concluding passage of Matthew, the eleven disciples were exhorted to teach all nations to obey all that Jesus has commanded (28:19), five primary discourses come to the reader's mind, with the climactic teaching moment being Matthew 25:31-46. While the recipients of the five, great discourses on the story level have been primarily the disciples (along with the crowds in chs. 5-7, 13), Matthew's reader has been drawn to understand herself within the audience of the discourses on the rhetorical level (Rhoads and Michie's term), especially toward the end of each discourse.[14] Thus, the shape of the narrative invites the reader to understand Matt 25:31-46 as a climactic moment in the gospel and to embrace and obey Jesus' teaching in it.[15]

The first issue is the identity of the "least of these" is vigorously debated in Matthean studies. Two primary possibilities emerge. First, there are many who argue that "least of these" refer to the poor and destitute among all humanity, what has been called a universalistic reading of this term. Ulrich Luz observes that this reading "has the strongest impact [today] not, to be sure, on exegesis per se but rather on theology

[14] David Rhoads and Donald Michie, *Mark as Story: An Introduction to the Narrative of a Gospel* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1982), 19-35.

[15] Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation*, trans. Caridad Inda and John Eagleson (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988), 196.

overall."[16] This observation seems to be corroborated by Gustavo Gutiérrez, who contends that "[e]xegetes are alarmed by the way that many theologians use this text."[17]

Arguments for a universalistic position come from a number of textual facets.[18] First, evidence of a non-literal use in Matthew that goes beyond Jesus' followers (e.g., 5:21-24, 47; 7:3-5) would allow for the possibility of its use more broadly in 25:40. The framing of 25:31-46 as that of universal judgment argues for understanding the "least" in a universal sense as well.[19] Contextual arguments include Matthew's exhortation to love one's enemies (5:44) as a theme that needs to shape the interpretation of 25:40 and the implicit connection between 25:31-46 and the fifth of Matthew's beatitudes (Blessed are the merciful) which is unqualified in its scope.[20]

A second major interpretation is that the "least of these" are Christians or a subset of believers in Jesus (e.g., itinerant missionaries).[21] This view gains support largely from

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[16] Ulrich Luz, "The Final Judgment (Matt 25:31-46): An Exercise in 'History of Influence' Exegesis," in *Treasures New and Old: Contributions to Matthean Studies*, ed. David R. Bauer and Mark Allan Powell, SBLSS 1 (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1996), 271-310.

[17] Arland J. Hultgren, *The Parables of Jesus: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), 312.

[18] W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to St. Matthew*, 3 vols., ICC (Edinburgh, UK: T & T Clark, 1988-1997), 3:429; Hultgren, *Parables*, 320-25; Gutiérrez, *Liberation*, 197; Rudolf Schnackenburg, *The Gospel of Matthew*, trans. Robert R. Barr (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002), 258; David Wenham, *The Parables of Jesus* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1989), 91. For a history of interpretation of Matt 25:31-46 with a thorough catalog of commentators and their views, see Sherman W. Gray, *The Least of My Brothers: Matthew 25:31-46: A History of Interpretation*, SBLDS 114 (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1989).

[19] Gutiérrez, *Liberation*, 19; Hultgren, *Parables*, 322; Schnackenburg, *Gospel*, 258.

[20] Davies and Allison, *Critical*, 3:429.

[21] Held by Luz, "Final Judgment," 280-284, 286; Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 14-28* (Dallas, TX: Word, 1993), 744-745; Donald Senior, *Matthew*, ANTC (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1998), 283-84; R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, NICNT (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007), 964-965; David E. Garland, *Reading Matthew: A Literary and Theological Commentary* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2001), 248; D. A. Carson, *Matthew*, EBC (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1984), 520; and David L. Turner, *Matthew*, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 605-606. Robert H. Gundry, *Matthew: A Commentary on His Literary and Theological Art* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1982), 514.

the further qualification in 25:40: ("the least of these, my brothers and sisters").[22] Given the way the evangelist has routinely used the familial term to refer to Jesus' followers across his gospel (when used non-literally; e.g., 12:46-50), continuity of usage is typically argued for 25:40.

The interest in these two views for the purposes of this chapter relates to the contribution of either reading for defining boundaries in this judgment scene. It would appear obvious that a universalistic reading blurs boundaries between insiders and outsiders, "the us and the other," since Jesus himself identifies not only with his own people who are in need but with the needy of the entire world. Gutiérrez, borrowing the language of Congar, speaks of "the sacrament of our neighbor" to express the collapsing of the boundary between Lord and "least of these."[23] This language also narrows the gap between Matthew's reader and the "least." If Jesus is shown to be in solidarity with the "least" to such an extent that what is done to them is done to him, then those who act on behalf of the "least" join in that same solidarity not just for Jesus' sake, but also for the sake of the "least." Gutiérrez continues, "the neighbor is not an occasion, an instrument for becoming closer to God. We are dealing with a real love of man for his own sake [sic] and not 'for the love of God.'"[24]

While a universalistic reading tends to blur boundaries between "us and other," the obverse—that a particularistic reading highlights boundaries—is simply not true, at least not universally so! Some who favor or even argue for a particularistic reading also

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[22] Luz, "Final Judgment," 280-84, 286.

[23] Gutiérrez, *Liberation*, 201.

[24] Gutiérrez, *Liberation*, 202; Jeffrey S. Siker, *Scripture and Ethics: Twentieth Century Portraits* (Oxford, NY: Oxford University Press, 1997), 129.

admit to an obscuring of clear categories in this passage. For example, Dan Via, while acknowledging that Matthew's most explicit statements lead to a reading of "my least brothers [and sisters]" as disciples (believers in Jesus), argues that "the text refuses to stay within these limits."[25] He bases a wider referent on the surprise of the "sheep" juxtaposed with the close connection between Christ and his disciples in Matthew more broadly: "it is difficult to see how a person could meet a disciple and not know that he has also met Christ...[Since the church's ministry is modeled after that of Jesus,] to have encountered a disciple is to know that person as a disciple of Jesus."[26] For Via, the surprise of the sheep over encountering Jesus in the "least" indicates the latter must include others beyond disciples.

Ulrich Luz, who argues that a universalistic interpretation is unfounded on the basis of the passage, nevertheless explores ways that this text pushes at its limits (to borrow Via's language).[27] First, he notes, "Matthew has handed on this explosive text; even though for himself, as for the entire church, it is love for the members of the congregation which stands in the foreground."[28] In addition to Matthew's inclusion of "this explosive text," Luz speaks of the destabilizing effect of the text. To the extent that Matthew

> Was concerned to show that the Christian church has no special privilege in the final judgment, but rather will be asked…only about her deeds of love, . . . this Matthean text carries with it a warning against every attempt at Christian or ecclesiastical self-absolutizing. The modern proponents of the 'universal' interpretation have sought [310] to take further steps in this same direction of 'de-

[25] Dan O. Via Jr., "Ethical Responsibility and Human Wholeness in Matthew 25:31-46," *Harvard Theological Review* 80 (January 1987): 92.

[26] Via, "Matthew 25:31-46," 92. Similarly, Hultgren, *Parables,* 322.

[27] Luz, "Final Judgment," 308.

[28] Luz, "Final Judgment," 309.

> absolutizing' the Christian church. Accordingly, they do not work with the sense of the biblical text itself, but rather with the direction in which it points.[29]

Both Via and Luz identify a kind of blurring of boundaries—a bridging toward the other—within and via the text. Though it seems that the categories of sheep, goats, and "least of these" are clearly delineated, their edges blur as the scene unfolds. R. T. France, who argues for Christians as the referent, also indicates some measure of ambiguity of border ambiguity. He points to the element of surprise in this regard: both sheep and goats are surprised that their treatment of the "least" was actually action toward Jesus. "They have helped, or failed to help, not a Jesus recognized in his representatives, but a Jesus incognito. . .They seem closer to what some modern theologians call 'anonymous Christians' than to openly declared supporters of Jesus himself."[30] Thus, some particularistic readings appear to lead (in spite of themselves) to boundary ambiguities between "us/other."

A sermon by Haddon Robinson on Matthew 25:31-46, "Surprises at the Judgment," serves as a focal example of Anglo-Evangelical appropriation of this. Additionally, six sermons that draw on this passage as their primary text have been reviewed (from sermonsearch.com) to corroborate themes identified in Robinson's message.[31]

In his sermon, Robinson refers only in passing to the identity of the "least of these" (though not using the language of "least" or an equivalent). In that brief comment, the particularistic reading is evident: the ones who did not receive help from those on the

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[29] Luz, "Final Judgment," 309-310.

[30] France, *Matthew*, 959.

[31] "Matthew 25: 31-46," Sermon Search, accessed June 10, 2016, http://www.sermonsearch.com.

king's left are "those who belong" to [Jesus.][32] Interestingly, there is a similar lack of emphasis on "the least" in the other sermons reviewed.

As Robinson expands on the identity of "those who belong to [the king]," he gives two homiletical examples: a young female student of his who had recently lost two family members and a seminary couple who were struggling financially. This confirms his reading of "the least" as Christians. It is significant that, although he includes these examples of persons whom he helped without realizing the importance of his actions, his focus is more upon the "unremembered acts of kindness" that characterized the sheep of the story than upon the "least" with whom Jesus identifies.[33] The subtle shift of focus from persons in need to a Christian's (sheep's) kind actions might account for Robinson's lack of any emphasis on solidarity with the "least" in his sermon. This omission is also characteristic of the six sermons reviewed. In only a few cases do these preachers allude to concepts of solidarity or identification between Jesus and the "least" or between faithful Jesus followers and the "least." One sermon explicitly invokes the principle that whatever Christians do for others in Jesus' name they do for him. Another gives the illustration of St. Francis, who saw the face of Jesus in a leper he served. The other sermons reviewed tend to emphasize, along with Robinson, the importance of (acts of) kindness (two sermons) and or to focus on the importance of faith over works. This focus on the action of a Believer over the person for whom the act is done is reminiscent of

[32] Haddon Robinson, "Surprises at the Judgment," in *Creative Styles of Preaching*, ed. Mark Barger Elliott (Louisville, KY: John Knox Westminster Press, 2000), 141-145.

[33] Robinson, "Surprises," 144-146.

Gutiérrez's indictment of someone being "more interested in the charitable action he was performing than in the concrete person for whom it was done."[34]

Another emphasis in Robinson's sermon along with the six others is an apologetic for faith rather than work as the basis for salvation. While this issue has been raised in Matthean commentaries, the sermons reviewed gave more attention and energy to this concern. All five sermons by Baptists at least touched on the issue of faith and works, arguing that Matthew 25:31-46 does not teach that Christians are saved because of what they do. A few of these spend significant time responding to this issue. The single sermon from an Assemblies of God preacher speaks of the actions of Christians as evidence of the work of the Spirit in their lives. Robinson also gives attention to this issue, assuring his hearers that this passage does not communicate that doing charity will get you into heaven.[35] He also base actions of Believers in God's work in their lives.[36] In the end, people will "make it in" through "brokenness of spirit, throwing themselves on God's grace."[37] This claim signals movement away from actions done for "the least" as a criterion of judgment.

A more overarching, though implicit, issue that arises from the text and intersects with ways of appropriating it in an evangelical context is one that receives sparse attention, both in the scholarly literature and the popular usage of the passage. Often unrecognized are the power dynamics that are assumed and addressed by this passage in its Matthean context and which have implications for current reflections on the text.

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[34] Gutiérrez, *Liberation*, 200.

[35] Robinson, "Surprises," 143.

[36] Robinson, "Surprises," 144.

[37] Robinson, "Surprises," 145.

These dynamics and structures of power are evident in (1) the terminology used ("least of these"); (2) authority themes more broadly in Matthew's gospel; and (3) the power shift that occurs in the climactic moment of this judgment scene.

First, Matthew's use of "least" illuminates a status category. The evangelist uses a related term in two previous contexts; ("little ones") is used in chapters ten and eighteen. In support of understanding these words as possible status terms, Nida and Louw, in their lexicon arranged by semantic domains, categorize certain usages of both under the heading "Low Status or Rank (including persons of low status)."[38] In each Matthean context, this terminology has status connotations. In Matt 10:42, Matthew's use illustrates the ultimate act of welcome (to Jesus, who identifies with those sent out in his name; 10:40). As his followers are to welcome prophets and righteous people (10:41), they should even welcome the (little one) disciple. This is an argument that uses a more maximal category to convince of the importance of welcome: even the little ones are to be welcomed as Jesus would be children are to be welcome as you would welcome Jesus. The status denotations of little one are further emphasized by its use in the third and final position of the series and the action of giving to a little one "even a cup of cold water" (10:42). Actions done toward (even) this "little one" prove the depth of welcome expected by Jesus.

In chapter eighteen, the status implications of Matthew's use of little one become even more evident. The chapter begins with the disciples asking a status question of Jesus: "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" (18:1). In response, Jesus brings a child into their midst as an answer to their question. Given that children had little status

[38] Johannes Louw and Eugene Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament Based on Semantic Domains*, vol. 2 (New York, NY: United Bible Societies, 1988), 1:739-740.

in first-century Greco-Roman society, the object lesson is about status and the person to emulate is one of low status.[39] This is confirmed in 18:4, where Jesus speaks about becoming humble like children, emphasizing their relative lack of status.[40] Welcoming children, those of low status, is then tied to welcoming Jesus himself (18:5; similar to 10:40). In 18:6-14, the references to children transpose into language of little ones. These "little ones" are not identical to children; they are a broader group with the church. Yet they too are characterized by lowly status and the vulnerability that would result from it.[41] Relevant in this regard is the injunction to Jesus' followers not to despise the little ones in their community (18:10).

Turning to Matthew the twenty-fifth chapter, the evangelist draws on a superlative of little ones to indicate a group that is marginalized and vulnerable.[42] By using this term in line with the previous usages of little one, the author emphasizes the lack of status and the vulnerability of "the least of these" as compared to the other groups in this scene (the king, the sheep, and the goats). By using this distinctive term little ones, the low status of this group is especially emphasized in Matthew the twenty-fifth. The status connotations of this language in 25:31-46 will be explored more closely momentarily, especially in relation to the power differentials evident in the passage.

Secondly, the power dynamics at play in this passage intersect with the theme of authority across the gospel of Matthew, and more specifically the relationship of Jesus'

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[39] Jeannine K. Brown, *The Disciples in Narrative Perspective: The Portrayal and Function of the Matthean Disciples* (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2002), 71.

[40] France, *Matthew*, 678-679; Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, 2:757.

[41] Hultgren, *Parables*, 317.

[42] Max Zerwick and Mary Grosvenor, *A Grammatical Analysis of the Greek New Testament* (Rome, Italy: Biblical Institute Press, 1981), 84.

authority to the community of Believers. While the motif of Jesus' authority is ubiquitous in Matthew, the granting of authority to Jesus' disciples (the twelve, specifically) is more circumscribed. The reader first hears of authority given to the twelve at Matthew 10:1, where authority to participate in the ministry of Jesus (in performing healing and exorcism) is granted.[43] Then at the climactic scene of Peter's confession of Jesus as Messiah, authority is promised to Peter in the declaration that the keys of the kingdom will be given by Jesus to him and that his binding and loosing activity will be effectual (16:19). While the referents of these images are debated, what is clear is that Jesus promises future ecclesial authority to Peter.[44] Identical language of binding and loosing is used in Matthew the eighteenth chapter by Jesus to indicate the (future) authority of the twelve disciples, and Matthew's community by extension (18:18). As Matthew's Jesus looks ahead to a (post-resurrection) time when his followers will carry out his mission and commands, he envisions them acting on his authority.

Yet the final scene of Matthew complicates (and clarifies) this picture. As Jesus meets the eleven in Galilee after his resurrection, he declared that, "all authority in heaven and earth has been given to [him]" (28:18). The astute reader, having heard the words of Jesus to his disciples at 16:19 and 18:18 might assume that in this final moment of Matthew's gospel Jesus will hand over at least a measure of his authority (the keys of the kingdom) to the disciples. This is precisely what Jesus does not do, according to Matthew. Instead, Jesus commissions his disciples to missional living—baptizing and teaching—and promises his own presence with them "to the very end of the age" (28:20).

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[43] Brown, *Disciples*, 99-101.

[44] Mark Allan Powell, "Binding and Loosing: A Paradigm of Ethical Discernment from the Gospel of Matthew," *Currents in Theology and Mission* 30, no. 6 (2003): 438-445.

Any authority granted to Jesus' disciples—and to the Matthean community by extension—is a derived authority. It is an authority that comes via his presence. Thus, for Matthew, the disciples and the church do not possess authority; it belongs to Jesus alone (28:18). Their only access to that authority is through his presence with his people (1:23; 18:20; 28:20).

This thematic assessment of authority in Matthew sets the stage for a reading of Matthew 25:31-46 that highlights the power shift, which occurs as the scene progresses. The king (25:34; a figure of authority)[45] has separated all humanity into two categories.[46] The scene develops as the criterion of judgment is clarified: both groups are judged on the basis of their treatment of Jesus (25:34-36, 41-43). So far, so good, all is as expected. Human response to Jesus is the crucial criterion of kingdom inclusion as throughout Matthew.

The unexpected comes when Jesus defines their response to a Jesus who was hungry, thirsty, a stranger, naked, sick, and imprisoned. This is a different Jesus than the One who uses his authority to heal sickness, to feed the hungry, to welcome the stranger (e.g., Matthew 8-9) or so it would seem. Clarification comes when, in response to the similar question from both groups, Jesus specifies, "whatever you did for one of the least of these...you did for me" (25:40). Whatever we call this relationship between Jesus and the "least"—whether solidarity, identification, or substitution —what is significant is that Jesus is present with them in a way that reorients readerly expectations.[47] The scene has, up to this point, had three character or groups: the king (Jesus), the sheep on his right, and

[45] France, *Matthew*, 960.

[46] Luz, "Final Judgment."

[47] Gutiérrez, *Liberation*, 201.

the goats on his left and Jesus is the One with ultimate authority. The introduction of the "the least of these"—and their clear alignment with Jesus himself redistributes power in the scene. The authoritative Jesus is shown to side with the "least," a group that (by definition) lacks status and power. Thus, just as Jesus has shared the disadvantages and marginalization of the least with them (he was hungry, sick, and poor), so the least now aligned with his power and authority via his presence. We have seen that Matthew connects Jesus' authority with his presence, especially in 28:18-20 (also 18:18-20). If Jesus is especially present with "the least," then by implication Jesus' power is accessed by them as well. The reversals of the kingdom that have been highlighted by Matthew's Jesus become reality (e.g., 5:3-10; 19:20; 20:16; 23:11).

Turning to the ways in which this kind of reading intersects evangelical appropriation of the passage, it is telling that very few sermons reviewed raised issues of power, especially related to structural or systemic issues or empowerment of those most marginalized. One sermon does accentuate Jesus' authority and power in the passage, drawing on Matthew 28:18 for his universal authority, but does not interact with the status connotations. In fact, only one of the sermons surveyed attended to the status connotations of Matthew's language of "least." The preacher of that sermon speaks of the tendency to serve and help important people, since these actions often pay us back in some way.

Robinson's sermon provides a fairly typical response to the features of the passage that have the most potential to address issues of power (and challenge a status quo), namely the status connotations of the least of these and Jesus' identification with this group. On the one hand, Robinson never uses the language of the "least," choosing to

frame the recipients of Christian kindness as "those who belong to him."[48] As a result, he does not mention the status connotations of this Matthean language nor does he attend to the power differentials implicit with this language and its use in conjunction with the other actors of the story.

On the other hand, the sheep's surprise at Jesus' identification with the "least" is highlighted. In fact, the feature of surprise accounts for about half of the sermon and its title. Key to an assessment of Robinson's interpretation of this feature is his repeated statement that "little [unknown,] unremembered acts of kindness and love" are to characterize Christians (the sheep).[49] These unremembered acts, according to Robinson, are those "that we hardly think about but are important to the king."[50] Interestingly, the other sermons reviewed provide additional examples of this theme. One preacher speaks of little actions of service and the importance of "little bitty choices," another of "spontaneous acts of kindness." Another cites D. L. Moody about a willingness to do little as well as great things.

An observation and an interpretation seem significant here. First, the minimization of the actions toward "the least" is thematic. The recurring use of the diminutive "little" is striking (across three sermons, including Robinson's). What might be described as significant actions of solidarity are reduced to "little acts" or even "itty bitty" ones. While Matthew uses the diminutive "least" to speak of persons who are disadvantaged and seemingly insignificant, in the sermons this language shifts to describe

[48] Robinson, "Surprises," 143.

[49] Robinson, "Surprises," 144.

[50] Robinson, "Surprises," 143.

seemingly insignificant actions (which warrant surprise by the sheep at the final judgment). This leads to an interpretive comment.

The shift in emphasis from marginalized person to "insignificant actions" assists the thematic movement from power and status categories to privatizing and individualizing motifs. The privatization of Matthew's acts of justice and mercy[51] is communicated in the interpretation of these acts as "little unknown, unremembered acts."[52] The passage is individualized through a focus away from Jesus' identification with the least of these to an emphasis on "acts of kindness and love that flow from [a person's] inner nature—which has been touched by God."[53] According to Emerson and Smith, in their sociological study, "Divided by Faith: Evangelical Religion and the Problem of Race in America," individualism is a particularly tenacious trait of white evangelical Christianity. As they note, "[i]ndividualism is very American, but the type of individualism and the ferocity with which it is held distinguishes white evangelicals from others. . .for them individuals exist independent of structures and institutions."[54] They go on to explain:

> Contemporary white American evangelicalism is perhaps the strongest carrier of this freewill-individualist tradition. The roots of this individualist tradition run deep, dating back to shortly after the sixteenth-century Reformation, extending to much of the Free Church tradition, flowering in America's frontier awakenings and revivals, and maturing in spiritual pietism and anti-Social Gospel fundamentalism. Although the larger American culture is itself highly individualistic, the close connection between faith and freewill individualism to

[51] Via, "Matthew 25:31-46," 84.

[52] Robinson, "Surprises," 143.

[53] Robinson, "Surprises," 144.

[54] Michael O. Emerson and Christian Smith, *Divided by Faith: Evangelical Religion and the Problem of Race in America* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2000), 76.

> the exclusion of progressive thought renders white evangelicals even more individualistic than other white Americans.[55]

This individualizing tendency contributes to a devaluing of actions apparent in the language of little acts and the like, in some of the sermons reviewed. This minimization of action might, in turn, contribute to the arguments in most of the sermons against viewing this passage as supporting judgment by works.

Gutiérrez, in his discussion of Matthew 25:31-46, warns against an individualistic understanding of the love of neighbor and our encounter of God in the poor. For Gutiérrez, neighbor "refers to the exploited social class, the dominated people, and the marginated race. The masses are also our neighbor. . .Indeed, to offer food or drink in our day is a political action; it means the transformation of a society structured to benefit a few who appropriate to themselves the value of the work of others."[56] Attention to the power dynamics at play both in Matthew and in Christian actions, even "charitable" ones, provides a needed corrective to these individualizing tendencies and readings.

In fact, a recent article by Shane Claiborne offers from and to a broadly evangelical audience a compelling contrast to an individualizing focus of Matthew the twenty-fifth chapter.[57] Claiborne speaks of the "layers separating us from others, especially those who are poor from those who are not. There are obvious layers like picket fences and SUVs, but there are also the more subtle ones like charity." He then riffs on Matthew the twenty-fifth chapter:

> When we get to heaven, though, I'm not convinced Jesus is going to say, "When I was hungry, you gave a check to the United Way and they gave me something to

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[55] Emerson and Smith, *Divided by Faith*, 76.

[56] Gutiérrez, *Liberation*, 202.

[57] Shane Claiborne, "The Great Divide," *Relevant* 45 (*May-June 2010): 84-85.*

> eat," or, "When I was naked, you donated clothes to the Salvation Army and they clothed me." Jesus is not seeking distant acts of charity. He seeks concrete acts of love: "*you* gave me something to eat ... *you* gave me something to drink ... *you* clothed me ... *you* invited me in ... *you* looked after me ... *you* came to visit me [in prison]" (Matthew 25:35-36).[58]

Claiborne addresses issues of "us/other" that may very well be embedded in practices of charity. He also goes on to note the power differentials that can be maintained, while supposedly helping the least of these. "Faith-based nonprofits can tend to mirror secular organizations, maintaining the same hierarchies of power and separation between rich and poor. They can too easily merely facilitate the exchange of goods and services, putting professionals in the middle to guarantee the rich do not have to face the poor and power does not shift."[59]

This study has examined the intersections of scholarly and ecclesial interpretation and appropriation of Matthew 25:31-46. Particular attention was paid to the identity and function of the "the least"—in the passage and in representative evangelical preaching of it. An attempt was made to assess power dynamics within the text, especially the realignment of authority that implicitly occurs in the Jesus' solidarity with the "least." While evangelical preaching has not much addressed or responded to these structural dynamics of the text, other voices (some home grown) have begun filling this gap. This chapter was designed to spur such conversations and appropriations to offer fresh readings and hearings of this—as Luz calls it—"explosive text."

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[58] Claiborne "Divide," 84.

[59] Claiborne "Divide," 84.

CHAPTER THREE

HISTORICAL FOUNDATIONS

Wesley Temple African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church is a member of the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church denomination (A.M.E. Zion) also known as the Freedom Church. The fight for freedom and justice and political engagement in the black church has been important during slavery, the modern civil rights movement and up to the present Black Lives Matter Movement. The birthing of the A.M.E. Zion Church can be traced back to blacks that were members of John Street Methodist Church in New York City and how they were treated. Blacks who were members of the John Street Methodist Church had to sit in the balcony while white members were able to sit and worship where-ever they wanted. If there were not enough space for all worshippers the black members would be forced to leave worship to accommodate the white worshippers. In addition, black preachers were not allowed to preach on Sunday mornings. They were not treated as equals with the white ministers.

In 1796 a group of the black worshippers decided that they would rather start and worship at their own churches than to continue to be discriminated against and be mistreated in the John Street Methodist Church. Among the black leaders who decided to start a black church were James Varick, Peter Williams and Christopher Williams. It is unlikely that in 1796 they used the word social justice but the black members who left John Street Methodist Church to start their own church were fighting for social justice.

The first church that was started by the A.M.E. Zion Church was called Zion. Although the black worshippers left John Street Methodist Church they remained a part of the Methodist Episcopal Church denomination. As a result of them remaining a part of the Methodist Episcopal Church denomination although blacks attended the churches their pastors were white who were assigned to them by the white bishops of the Methodist Episcopal Church denomination.

Over the years, the A.M.E. Zion Church has referred to itself as the "Freedom Church." The church began its fight for the rights of black people in 1796 and in many ways continue to fight for the freedom of blacks today. Some of the most notable persons who were members of the A.M.E. Zion Church include Sojourner Truth, Harriet Tubman and Fredrick Douglass. In addition to fighting for the freedom of black people in general the A.M.E. Zion Church was one of the first protestant denominations to ordain women. As members of the Freedom Church Truth, Tubman and Douglas fought for freedom, justice and equality for black people and women. Sojourner Truth fought to abolish slavery and for women's rights. She was not afraid to use the court system to fight for her rights. When one of her sons was sold into slavery she sued a white man for the return of her son and she won. She was known for giving speeches about abolishing slavery and women's suffrage. She gave one of her most notable speeches "Ain't I A Woman" in Akron, Ohio not far from Wesley Temple A.M.E. Zion Church.

Harriet Tubman was known as the Moses of her people and the one who led many blacks from slavery to freedom. She risked her life many times leading other to freedom. Harriet Tubman was a very active member of the A.M.E. Zion Church. When she died she left her home and property to the A.M.E. Zion Church. Like Sojourner Truth, Harriet

Tubman fought for the freedom and justice of blacks and for women's rights. In addition to leading many of her family members to freedom through the Underground Railroad, she led others to freedom. She was bold and risked her life for the freedom of others.

From its inception the A.M.E. Zion church and its members have been active in the fight for freedom and justice for black people. The early leaders and bishops were on the front lines of struggle for freedom. Although the names of notable members of the A.M.E. Zion church have been discussed there are countless members who fought in the struggle whose names were not recorded. The early churches served as a place of worship, a place to meet and in some areas the church served as the school-house. Another influential leader that served the A.M.E. Zion Church and fought for freedom and justice for blacks was Bishop James Walker Hood of North Carolina. He created many A.M.E. Zion Churches in North Carolina while serving as the grand master for the entire South of the Prince Hall Masonic Lodge another organization in the black community that was used to strengthen the political and economic forces of the black community.[1]

James Walker Hood (May 1831-30 Oct. 1918), clergyman, educator, and bishop, the son of Levi and Harriet Walker Hood, was born on the farm of Ephraim Jackson in Chester County, Pennsylvania, nine miles from Wilmington, Delaware. His mother, a woman of "extraordinary intelligence," was much interested in all matters affecting blacks, including a separate church for her race. His father was a Methodist minister. While living in Wilmington, Hood's parents became involved in a controversy with the

[1] David G. Hackett, *The Prince Hall Masons and the African American Church: The Labors of Grand Master and Bishop James Walker Hood, 1831-1918* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

white Methodists; henceforth they supported the African Methodist Episcopal Zion church, established as the Methodist church for blacks.

Hood's childhood was a time of hard work, danger, and meager education. Levi Hood opposed binding any of his twelve children to an apprenticeship because he thought it like slavery. He did arrange verbal contracts whereby his children would work for food, clothing, and six weeks of school a year until they were sixteen. After young Hood, had served a short term under a contract with Ephraim Jackson, the arrangement was ended, and he found work where he could in Philadelphia and New York. He was once kidnapped, apparently to be sold into slavery, but escaped. Although he attended school for only a few months in Pennsylvania and Delaware, his native ability enabled him to pursue general and theological studies without a teacher except for a tutor in Greek.

At age eleven he experienced conversion, but questioned his beliefs until he was eighteen. At age twenty-one he mentioned to a minister his call to preach, thinking mistakenly that the clergyman would make arrangements for him. In 1856 Hood finally appeared before the New York Conference of the A.M.E. Zion church and secured a license to preach. The next year he moved to New Haven, Connecticut, and filled a pulpit there. In 1859 the New England Conference received him on trial and appointed him a missionary without pay to Nova Scotia. Lacking the funds to go, he worked in a New York hotel for thirteen months to become self-supporting. After being ordained deacon in Boston in September 1860, he departed for Nova Scotia. Hood landed at Halifax and walked the forty-five miles to Englewood, a mile from Bridgeton where he found a black community. Although its members were Baptists and hostile to Methodism, Hood had gathered a congregation of eleven persons before his departure in 1863. In the interim he

was ordained an elder in 1862 in Hartford. After serving in Bridgeport, Connecticut for six months in late 1863, he was sent as a missionary to North Carolina where he remained for the rest of his life.

In North Carolina Hood found his major area of service. In early 1864, against the opposition of white Northern Methodists, he persuaded the black Southern Methodist congregations in New Bern and Beaufort to affiliate with the A.M.E. Zion church. When the Northern Methodists contested his conversion of these congregations to Zion, Hood was forced to appeal to the secretary of war for a ruling that permitted the blacks to align with whichever church they desired. In late 1864 he helped to found the North Carolina Conference, and over the years he aided in the establishment of numerous churches within its bounds. Hood was a pastor for three years in New Bern, two years in Fayetteville, and over three years in Charlotte. After becoming a bishop in 1872, he resided in Fayetteville until his death.

Hood became active in North Carolina politics on behalf of his people. In the fall of 1865 he presided over the first statewide political convention of blacks, which met to demand civil and political rights. In 1868 he participated in the state constitutional convention and contributed greatly to placing strong homestead and public school provisions in the constitution. From 1868 to 1871 Hood served as assistant state superintendent of public instruction, with the major duty of founding and supervising schools for blacks. Although hampered by white hostility and the lack of black teachers, he increased attendance to 49,000 students in 1871. Hood remained active in the Republican Party serving as a delegate to the national convention in 1872 and as temporary chairman of the state convention in 1876. He also served briefly as a

magistrate and a deputy collector of customs and from 1868 to 1871, without pay, as assistant superintendent of the Freedman's Bureau in North Carolina.

Hood's duties as bishop took him to most states and to Europe. As an itinerant bishop, he had—by 1914—presided over several conferences annually for these total periods: New York, twenty-seven years; New England, twenty-four years; Allegheny-Ohio, six years; Alabama, four years; Kentucky and New Jersey, four years each; California, three years; Philadelphia and Baltimore, three years; and Tennessee, one year. Yet most of his time he spent in the Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Georgia conferences, which he had helped to found before becoming a bishop.

One of Hood's contributions as bishop was to help establish and guide Zion Wesley Institute (later Livingstone College) in Salisbury, North Carolina. He presided over its board of trustees for over thirty years, educated six of his children there, and donated a good portion of his annual salary to keep it open. In 1881 Hood attended an ecumenical conference in London to help secure finances for the institute. He appointed a committee of Englishmen to direct the fund-raising, had the name of the college changed to Livingstone in honor of David Livingstone who had recently died, and provided the means for the president of Livingstone to travel in England to assist in fund-raising.

Hood's family life, although disrupted by long absences from home, centered around three marriages. In 1853 he married Hannah L. Ralph of Lancaster, Pennsylvania., who died in 1855. In 1858 he married Sophia J. Nugent of Washington, District of Columbia, who before her death bore him seven children, four of whom survived. On 6 June 1877, he married a twenty-seven-year-old widow from Wilmington, North Carolina, Keziah P. McCoy, who bore him two children. Keziah Hood was a

freeborn seamstress and an Episcopalian, educated in Episcopal Sabbath schools and at St. Frances Academy in Baltimore.

Hood was a large man of courage, conviction, and persistence. Two of his special interests were temperance and the rights of blacks in public transportation. From 1848 to 1863 conductors of the Pennsylvania Railroad tried on numerous occasions to remove him from first-class cars, but they never succeeded. In 1857 he was put off of streetcars in New York City five times in one night, but he was not deterred. In North Carolina Hood was so insistent in demanding first-class steamer accommodations that he was never bothered after the first contest. He avoided public transportation in the Deep South because asserting his rights absorbed so much energy. Regarding his second interest, Hood participated in every temperance campaign in North Carolina.

It is remarkable that Hood, who had little formal education, should have published five books: *The Negro in the Christian Pulpit* (1884); *One Hundred Years of the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church* (1895); *The Plan of the Apocalypse* (1900); *Sermons by . . .* (1908); and *Sketch of the Early History of the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church* (1914).

During the late nineteenth century, James Walker Hood was bishop of the North Carolina Conference of the AM.E. Zion Church and the grand master of the North Carolina Grand Lodge of the Prince Hall Masons. In his forty-four years as bishop, half of that time as senior bishop of the denomination, Reverend Hood was instrumental in planting and nurturing his denomination's churches throughout the Carolinas and Virginia. Founder of the North Carolina's denominational newspaper and college, author of five books including two histories of the AMEZ Church, appointed assistant

superintendent of public instruction and magistrate in his adopted state, Hood's career represented the broad mainstream of black denominational leaders who came to the South from the North during and after the Civil War.

James Walker Hood activities with the Prince Hall Masons complemented his work of the A.M.E. Zion Church. Many of his members in the lodge were also his members and ministers in the A.M.E. Zion Church. Although there was a different in some of their beliefs and rituals the two organizations had many important things in common. The origins of the relationship can be traced to the post-Revolutionary era when booth mutual benefit societies and the black church provided seedbeds of autonomy and bulwarks against the racism of white society. Following the Civil War, these two interwoven social institutions came to the South offering black Southerners similar "race histories" that countered white racial images while providing meaning and hope for their lives. Bishop Hood's Prince Hall members were active supporters of the church in a common struggle against racism and for the self-determination of the African American community.

In late November of 1874, Bishop James Walker Hood presided over the week-long eleventh annual gathering of the ministers of the North Carolina Conference of the A.M.E. Zion Church in New Berne, North Carolina. Bishop Hood had arrived as a Northern missionary in the city of New Berne in 1864 having been sent to work with the freed people in the South. He became a bishop in 1872 and by 1874 he had planted 366 churches with over 20,000 members.[2] As a northern missionary and church organizer, Hood operated in a situation where most of the newly freed slaves were either completely

[2] Minutes of the Eleventh Session of the North Carolina Conference of the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church in America, held in New Berne, NC, November 25-December 2, 1874 (Raleigh, NC: John Nicols and Company, 1875), 37-47.

unchurched or, in their exposure to religious teachings under slavery, were in need of additional structure and organization, at least from the northern perspective, in order to purify their Christianity from the distortions of southern white religion.[3] A religious conservative whose social activism stemmed from his belief that Christian conversion would lead to the downfall of oppression and social injustice, Hood urged his followers to pursue a "profound" commitment to Christ.

The context is Wesley Temple A.M.E. Zion Church and it was birthed in a similar manner as the A.M.E. Zion Church. Wesley Temple A.M.E. Zion Church was the first black church organized in Akron, Ohio. Wesley Temple's beginnings started when a small group saw the need for a church for blacks in Akron. As early as 1864, this group of fervent religious worshippers were meeting in different homes and small halls holding prayer meetings. Hascomb Hall at 11 1/2 North Howard Street was rented in 1866 and used as a place in which to worship. Rev. Joseph Armstrong, in 1868 after organizing the group, became the first pastor of the church, which was then called A.M.E. Zion Church. While plans were in the making to find a new home for the church, the congregation worshipped at the Bowen School at Broadway and Perkins Street, which is now the Administration Building for Akron Public Schools.[4] In 1870, the missionary ladies became very interested in missions and made plans to secure a permanent place to worship. They gained the trust and influence of Mr. George Crouse and Mr. Fred Stone, who were instrumental in raising funds to purchase a lot on South High Street. The Ladies Home Missionary Society, led by Mrs. Pharor, solicited additional funds from the

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[3] Daniel W. Stowell, *Rebuilding Zion: The Religious Reconstruction of the South, 1863-1877* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1998).

[4] "History of Wesley Temple African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church," as compiled by the church historian, 1987.

Honorable George Crouse and the Canal School Building was given to the church. It was moved onto the lot at South High Street and named Crouse Chapel A.M.E. Zion Church. Rev. Armstrong had a fund raising contest, giving the person who raised the largest amount of money the honor renaming Crouse Chapel. Mrs. Bell Wesley, an ardent and religious woman, raised the largest amount and the name was changed to Wesley Temple A.M.E. Zion Church.

In 1924, Rev. James Black was appointed pastor of Wesley Temple and purchased the site on which the church was erected and still stands at the corner of Perkins and Martin Luther King Boulevard. Rev. B. F. Gordon was appointed pastor in 1926. Plans to erect the edifice were drawn up by architects Wardner and Sommerville. The church was built by Mr. Plato, a Negro contractor at a cost of $170,000.00. The church was dedicated the week of August 12-19, 1928. The congregation walked from High Street Church to the new building. What a glorious day this was for all. The membership grew from 300 to 750 in a short time. During the depression years, Rev. J.E. Kennedy served as pastor. Many members were unemployed and the church was struggling under a heavy indebtedness. It has been repeated over and over how Rev. Kennedy would lock the church and go fishing to avoid creditors who wanted to reclaim the pipe organ in the church. Today Wesley Temple is still the only black congregation with a pipe organ in the city of Akron. Under the leadership of Rev. James P. Foote with the help of Dr. Noble Elderkin, members and the Ministerial Association, the mortgage was liquidated in 1945.

In 1953, Rev. E.E. Morgan, Jr. was appointed pastor. During his pastorate, a new three-storied educational unit was added to the existing building at a cost of $200,000.00,

which was raised by pledges from the members. The building consisted of offices, Sunday school classrooms, and multi-purpose rooms. In the early years, under the pastorate of the Rev. Dr. Eugene Morgan, the church was more active in the life of the community. In the sixties, Rev. Dr. Morgan was elected as the first African American to serve on the Akron Public School Board. As a member of the school board he made sure members of our congregation and other minorities were given equal opportunity when it came to employment. He also made sure that minority children were treated fairly.

Wesley Temple has always been a part of the struggle of freedom as justice. Wesley Temple Church actively participated in the Civil Rights Movement. It is often said that during major election campaigns that serious candidates always visited Wesley Temple to see the support of the pastor and members of Wesley Temple. Even before black pastors knew it was liberation theology they preached a theology about liberating the minds, souls and bodies of black people. They preached about equality in education, job opportunities and the quality of life for blacks.

Black liberation theology came about as a result of black preachers and black theologians refusing to accept an American theology that did not address the plight, struggles and lives of black people. Black liberation theology is a theological response racial hatred and oppression of the 1960s and the general racial climate in the United States. It appears that racial hatred and oppression may be on the rise again in the United States of America. We are witnessing a number of African Americans being killed by white police officers and African American males in particular without prosecutions or convictions. We are witnessing leading political candidates outright lead racist rallies.

These are the behaviors that gave rise to liberation theology, the Civil Rights Movement, the Black Power Movement and now the Black Lives Matter Movement.

Black Power was released on July 31, 1966 by the National Committee of Negro Churchmen (NCBC) and appeared as a full-page advertisement in the *New York Times*. The statement itself was a response to the burgeoning Black Power movement, spearheaded by the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). According to Gayraud Wilmore, this statement was designed to vindicate the young civil rights workers laboring in the rural south [and to] galvanize the left wing of the Southern-based civil rights movement and reassemble it within the province of black Christians who lived in the urban North.[5] Black clergy in the North sought to mediate the growing division between Martin Luther King, Jr.'s non-violent philosophy and SNCC's strident call for active black resistance to white oppression.

The NCBC's affirmation of Black Power set in motion a series of moves by black academics and laid the groundwork for a black theology of liberation. A Detroit conference held in 1967 and organized by black grassroots organizers addressed the role of churches and synagogues in alleviating the problems of the urban poor. From this conference, the Black Manifesto was released. This manifesto outlined economic grievances held by black Americans. The presenters of this manifesto demanded that white Christian churches and Jewish synagogues, as part and parcel of the system of capitalism pay reparations to black Americans in the form of $500,000,000. These reparations would be used in order to establish independent economic, social, and educational institutions for black Americans. Further, the manifesto called on black

[5] Gayraud S. Wilmore, "Introduction," in *Black Theology: A Documentary History, Volume I: 1966-1979*, ed. James Cone and Gayraud S. Wilmore (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993), 15-16.

Americans to avail themselves of whatever means necessary in pressuring white churches and synagogues to acquiesce to the half-billion dollar demand.[6] According to the manifesto, it was the churches and synagogues that not only possessed the majority of wealth in the United States, but also profited from the slave trade and continued to exploit black people.[7]

Joseph Washington's *Black Religion* also influenced the development of black liberation theology. Washington asserted that the theology of black religion was inadequate. For Washington, black religion was only a "folk" religion and lacking fundamental qualities necessary to be considered "true" religion. In the preface to *Black Religion,* Washington makes his beliefs concerning black religion plain: "I believe, the religion of the Negro lacks the following: a sense of the historic Church, authentic roots in the Christian tradition, a meaningful theological frame of reference, a search for renewal, an ecumenical spirit, and a commitment to an inclusive Church."[8] Washington argues that Christianity in black communities is "pseudo-Christianity," a folk religion committed more to the emancipation of black people than establishing itself as a non-folk religion.[9] His most damning charge is that the folk religion of black people is dysfunctional. While black folk religion is dynamic and energetic, it is not particularly creative, nor does it contribute anything to larger Christendom. Due to the segregation, repression and the like, black folk religion has concentrated solely on the

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[6] Gayraud S. Wilmore, "The Black Manifesto," in *Black Theology: A Documentary History, Volume I: 1966-1979*, ed. James Cone and Gayraud S. Wilmore (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993), 30-31.

[7] Wilmore, "The Black Manifesto," 31.

[8] Joseph R. Washington Jr., *Black Religion: The Negro and Christianity in the United States* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1984), vii.

[9] Washington Jr., *Black Religion,* 33.

enfranchisement of black people and, thus, has not created congregations that are more than "amusement centers."[10]

We are fortunate to have print church and digital black church history today but there was a time when black people relied on the oral history of the black church. That was in part because there was a time in American history when it was illegal for blacks to read. Therefore, church history and wisdom was shared and passed on from one generation to another through conversation and stories. Story telling time allowed blacks to gather in formal or informal settings to discuss issues that could not be discussed in the presence of whites or in public.[11] During slavery, the mother or a female mostly led the black family on the plantation, as the father was a visitor without any legal or recognized status in family relations. He might disappear as the result of being sold or because he might lose interest in the object of his affections.[12]

Historically the black church has cared for the poor and the children because of the nature of the slavery system, children were often sold away from their mothers thus an informal adoption and fictive kinship was developed among black extended families.[13] Remnants of the fictive kinship exist today. Many blacks refer to each other as brothers and sisters or cousins even if there is not a biological relationship. Many older members of the black community are referred to as grandma or pop or auntie and uncle.

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[10] Washington Jr., *Black Religion*, 42.

[11] Anne Streaty Wimberly and Evelyn L. Parker, *In Search of Wisdom: Faith Formation in the Black Church* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2002), 111.

[12] E. Franklin Frazier, *The Negro Church in America* (New York, NY: Schocken Books, 1974), 38.

[13] C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African American Experience* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1990), 311.

The black church became involved in creating extended families and through their preaching and teaching kept families and the community connected to each other. The church provided Sunday school for children and was the place that many first learned basic reading skills. Growing up in rural South Carolina many stories were shared regarding the school being in the church and about the one room school house where the neighbor who was your Sunday school teacher being your school teacher. Black clergy was well respected and thought of as the one who had the answers to all of life's problems.

Unfortunately, we are seeing a generation of youth who have no knowledge of and no respect for the institution and traditions of the black church. This generation of young people seems to be disconnected from the black church. Many of the black families who often worship together attend non-denominational churches or mega churches that even if they are led by a black pastor rarely hear a message about social justice or the need to fight for the poor and the oppressed. Historically, the black church has played a dominant role in the lives of black people as we experienced various shifts and transformations such as the urban migration from the South to the North and now back to the South; the rise and expansion of a new black middle class; the development of black secular institutions, and rise of competing black religions.[14]

The black church for many years through its preaching and teaching, symbols, belief system, morality, and rituals was the gathering place for black families. Not only was the black church the gathering place, it also provided important social occasions with opportunities for young people to meet and interact, recreational events, and a place

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[14] Jeffery L. Tribble Sr., *Transformative Pastoral Leadership in the Black Church* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillian, 2005), 5.

where young people could have a chance to develop and showcase their skills in public speaking, music, art, and other efforts. For many African Americans, the first public performance given and sometimes seen by black children occurred in the church.[15] Another important historical educational and nurturing function of the black church has been the opportunity to meet role models where they could observe, emulate, and examine the positive aspects of going to church as well as the double standards existing in adult behavior.

The black church has always been a place where black people could be affirmed and accepted, however in many of our contemporary black churches there exists a disproportionate focus on their programs and attention on adults and others who have grown up in the church and are familiar with its traditions. Other than occasional outreach programs, youth and the un-churched or newly churched have become an afterthought in the significant ministry plans of most black churches.

Today, the black church, families, and communities are challenged pressing issues caused by the problem of poverty. A large portion of the black population is mired in poverty, which has created a large black underclass. In addition to unemployment many black teens and young adults experience imprisonment and face severe difficulty in trying to reenter society upon release. Mass incarceration is a major problem facing blacks today. Mass incarceration many times is a result of racism and implicit bias.

Many of these youth are disconnected from mainstream society and the black community. The black church has had difficulty in dealing with issues of sexuality and although once functioned as an institution that socialized black young people has not assumed a leadership role on gang violence, high school dropout and pregnancy

[15] Lincoln and Mamiya, *The Black Church*, 312.

prevention. The popular prosperity gospel has failed to address the more pressing issues and issues of social justice.

One of the greatest challenges for the black church today is to developing new programs that both stimulate motivation to change within the black community as well as seeks changes in the discriminatory way institutions operate if there is to be a transformation in the community and the quality of life for black youth.[16] As mention earlier the black church historically has been a training ground for morals and behavior for the black community. However, it appears that today the gangs have more influence than the church over youth in the community. While it is critically important that the black church continue to fight to end racism and the discriminatory was institutions operate the church must find ways to stimulate positive change in the black community.

Before, during and after the days of separate but equal schools, in addition to starting black sponsored grade and high schools many black churches started colleges to educate and stimulate positive change in the black community. There were other colleges started by whites for blacks to attend. Livingstone College was founded as Zion Wesley Institute by a group of A.M.E. Zion ministers for the purpose of training ministers in Concord, North Carolina in 1879. The African Methodist Episcopal Church (AME) started Allen University. Allen University grew out of the church's desire to educate newly freed slaves and to ensure a well-trained clergy for the A.M.E. Church. In 1870 the A.M.E. Church purchased one hundred fifty aces of land to build Allen University.

Today, many black churches by themselves, lack the financial resources and staff to deal with the enormous problems of poverty and powerlessness that confront today's youth and families. However, black churches were natural grass roots community

[16] Lincoln and Mamiya, *The Black Church*, 333.

organizations that the civil rights movement could mobilize for change in the past and remains a source of capital to combat today's problems. With fewer resources and less active members many black churches must seek new paradigms and new ways to minister in order to be effective and accomplish some of the wins that the black church accomplished during the pre and post civil rights movement.

Historically Wesley Temple has been a leader in the community. Wesley Temple members served as leaders in the community. Guernia Morgan was the wife of Rev. Dr. Eugene Morgan. She served the church and community well. She was a public school teacher and was very active in community organizations. Mrs. Morgan was a member of the Delta Sigma Theta Sorority. She was a charter member of the Akron-Canton Chapter of Delta Sigma Theta. Prior to there being an Akron-Canton Chapter, Mrs. Morgan belonged to the Cleveland graduate chapter. On Friday, March 4, 1960, the Akron Alumnae Chapter of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc., was chartered in a closed ceremony in Canton, Ohio by the following Deltas, who were the Charter members of the Chapter: Sorors Bernice G. Armour, Elizabeth Dantzler, Hilda V. Douglas, Elizabeth Evans, C. Joyce Finley-Jackson, Benette C. McClellan, Guernia D. Morgan, Rebecca R Pennington, Ethel I. Phoenix, Lorene D. Pollard, Marie J. Slaughter, Viola Burke-Taylor, and Frances Kathaleen Welch.

On Sunday, March 6, 1960, the chapter held its first public presentation of the newly formed chapter at a special afternoon ceremony held at 5:00 p.m. at the historic Wesley Temple African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church (Akron's oldest African-American Church where Dr. Eugene Morgan Jr., the husband of charter member Guernia Morgan, served as pastor).

In addition to the Akron-Canton Chapter of Delta Sigma Theta having its beginning at Wesley Temple Church, the Akron Chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) was started at the Wesley Temple Church in 1917. The Akron NAACP was organized at Wesley Temple A.M.E. Zion Church in which also purchased the first $500 membership. A member of the Wesley Temple Church currently leads the Akron Branch of the NAACP. For many years Wesley Temple Church served as the home church of the who's who of the blacks in Akron.

Many very influential blacks and civil rights leaders were members and some are still members of the historic Wesley Temple Church. The late Edward Davis was a member of the Wesley Temple Church. Edward J. Davis was a visionary leader in the local government, the Democratic Party, and the African American community. Mr. Davis was the first African American to be elected to Akron City Council, to serve as Council President and as Council Clerk. Mr. Davis' long and successful career serves as an excellent model for effective engagement in public affairs. In addition to the late Edward Davis, Judge James Williams is an active member of the Wesley Temple Church. Judge James R. Williams embodied a life of service. He served on Akron City Council first representing Ward Four and later the entire city as Councilman-at-Large. He then continued a laudable career becoming U.S. Attorney for the Northern District of Ohio, Akron Municipal Court Judge and Summit County Common Pleas Judge. In addition to his political career, Judge Williams served as the twenty-fifth national president of the Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, Incorporated.

Mr. Ray Dove is an active member of Wesley Temple Church. Ray Dove, one of ten children and the first in his family to go to college, earned a master's degree in

chemistry. He became the first black research chemist in the rubber industry for Goodyear Tire and Rubber Company after attending The University of Akron. However, he did not obtain this post for many years and had to settle for being an elevator operator, where he was passed over by the very white students he tutored in chemistry. In those days his employer, the Goodyear Tire and Rubber Company, did not hire blacks as research scientists.

Rita Dove who is the daughter of Ray and Elvira Dove was born and raised in the Wesley Temple Church. She was named a Presidential Scholar, one of the top one hundred high-school graduates in the country and attended Miami University in Ohio as a National Merit Scholar. After graduating, Dove received a Fulbright to study at the University of Tübingen in West Germany, and later earned an MFA at the Iowa Writers' Workshop where she met her husband, the German writer Fred Viebahn. Rita Dove had a tremendous impact on American letters, not only through the scope of her poetry, but also through her work as an advocate. Dove was named U.S. Poet Laureate in 1993. Just forty years old at the time of her appointment, she was the youngest poet ever elected to the position. She was also the first African American to hold the title. Dove was also the first poet laureate to see the appointment as a mandate to generate public interest in the literary arts.

Journalist and media executive Albert Fitzpatrick, a member of Wesley Temple Church, was born on December 30, 1928 in Elyria, Ohio. He currently serves as the preacher steward and chairman of the board of stewards at Wesley Temple Church. Fitzpatrick developed an interest in journalism in high school, during which he worked part-time as a sports reporter for Elyria's local newspaper, the *Elyria Chronicle-*

Telegram. He earned his bachelor of arts. degree from Kent State University where he studied sociology and journalism. Fitzpatrick also served terms in the U.S. Army and Air Force. He is a veteran of World War II and the Korean War.

In 1956, Fitzpatrick joined the *Akron Beacon Journal*, where he was the only African American employee in the company. Fitzpatrick was promoted to news editor of the *Beacon Journal*, where he directed the paper's Pulitzer Prize winning coverage of the 1970 Kent State shooting. In 1973, Fitzpatrick was named managing editor of the newspaper, making him the first African American to run a major metro newsroom. In 1977, he was named executive editor. Then, after writing a letter to the chairman of Knight-Ridder, Inc. about the lack of diversity in their workforce, Knight-Ridder offered him a job as director of minority affairs. Fitzpatrick worked in that position from 1985 to 1987 and then as vice president of minority affairs, also at Knight-Ridder, from 1987 to 1994.

Dr. B.N. Riddle was a member of the Wesley Temple Church and was on the Wesley Temple trustee board and a member of the Brotherhood. The February 13, 1958 issue of the *Jet Magazine* had this to say about Dr. Riddle, "A Stow, Ohio Gynecologist was installed as president of the Akron Obstetrical and Gynecological Society and became the first black in the nation to head an organization of specialists in female medicine. Dr. Riddle is the only black member of the Akron society. He completed his training in obstetrics and gynecology at the Provident Hospital in Chicago." Dr. E. Gates Morgan, a surgeon, directed the choir and male chorus at Wesley Temple, and was a member of the Brotherhood. Dr. N.C. McNeil, a dentist, also sang in the choir and was active in the Brotherhood.

Wesley Temple was pastored by the Rev. Dr. Curtis T. Walker, Sr. who served from September, 1992 until June, 2009. Under Pastor Walker's leadership, the following programs were initiated: a tutorial program, feeding the needy twice a month, Saturday School for children, evangelistic crusades and new member's classes. The church purchased two twenty-five passenger seat busses, put a new roof on the church and apartment building, repaved the parking lots, purchased a dishwasher for the kitchen, purchased additional property and established the Library Resource Center (LRC). The church caught on to the spirit of volunteerism and Outreach Ministry. Prior to Rev. Walker leaving as pastor of Wesley Temple the church had entered into a phase of great decline, numerically, financially, and spiritually.

Rev. Vince Monden pastored the Wesley Temple Church from June 2009 to June 2013. Rev. Monden instituted a new kind of praise and worship. During the time that he served as pastor, the church struggled to reverse the years of decline. The membership had been drastically reduced and the weight of the debt was almost too much for the church to bear. The church was not able to keep the hot meal program going and many of the other community outreach programs were cut due to financial hardships. In June 2013 Rev. Charles Tyler, Sr. was appointed pastor. Upon my arrival the church was in debt. The church had a list of past due bills totaling more than $25,000. The church had unpaid property taxes and had not paid its financial responsibilities to the denomination in full for the prior three years.

Pastor Tyler, along with the members and officers, held several meetings to design a strategy to move the church forward. Unfortunately, the strategy that was designed did not include paying the unpaid financial obligation to the denomination. The

strategy seemed to have been working until the church received notice that they were responsible for paying the past due money to the denomination. Therefore, about $10,000 that the church thought would be used to pay past due bills and to bring back ministries that had been cut was sent to the denomination. A few weeks after paying nearly $10,000 to the denomination the boiler that heats the church stop working. A heating company came in and said that it would cost the church $21,000 to replace the boiler. The church obviously did not have the $21,000 and did not have the credit to borrow $21,000 because of the number of past due bills.

Pastor Tyler, along with the officer's, met with the members asking for members to contribute toward the $21,000.00. The pastor and members within three weeks contributed $14,000. A member of the trustee board and his wife loaned the church $7000. After having no heat in the sanctuary for a month we were able to have the boiler installed. Having to ask the members for $21,000 for a boiler made it difficult to ask members for money for outreach and ministry. However, Pastor Tyler asked individuals, organizations and families to sponsor a week for the hot meals program. The church was able to reinstitute the feeding ministry and to feed the many needy and homeless members of the community each week. In addition to the weekly feeding ministry, the church instituted other outreach and fellowship activities to minister to the community.

One can see that over the years Wesley Temple like many other churches some how lost its way. It seems that the struggle is no longer for justice and freedom but the struggle for the church is to pay the bills. The struggle is to keep the members happy and in the pew and do not worry about justice and freedom for the least of these.

CHAPTER FOUR

THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS

In many circles, the mention of the African-American religious tradition conjures mental images reflecting the vitality of its worship experience. The frenetic freedom of call and response, the celebratory performance of its music, and the spirited and picturesque oratory of the black preacher serve as the subject matter for many conversations and discourse about the black church. These discussions however, do not approach the complex nature, function, and meaning of the black church for African Americans. There has always been a dual connection between body and soul, now and then, other-worldly and this-worldly. This project deals with advocacy and social justice ministry both inside and outside the walls of the church and ties the spiritual needs of its congregants with their physical, economic, social, and political needs. This chapter will demonstrate how this has always been the function of the black church, describe where we have gotten off track in the contemporary church, offer a solution to the problem, and then show the relevance of the project to the resolution of the problem.

The slaves that arrived in America from West Africa did not arrive unequipped to deal with the dehumanizing effects of slavery. They could not have survived the brutality of white bondage and oppression without certain African antecedents and ancient ways of life that they brought with them to American including rituals, wise sayings and

teachings, myths, and stories which had been handed down from generation to generation.

These myths, folklore, and proverbs such as those passed on from the Yoruba people of Africa, were anything but primitive, unsophisticated, or naïve. They possessed a more than ordinary perception of moral truth.[1] These traditions had a holistic world view that made no separation between religion and life, the secular and the religious, or a detachable separation in everyday affairs between religious. Their entire perspective had only one comprehensive view that included religion as part and parcel of all of life. This religion, with its inseparable connection with God, the community, and all of life, was brought from Africa to America with the first Africans in the seventheenth and eighteenth centuries and served as a survival strategy for dealing with their everyday, dehumanizing experiences with the conditions of slavery.[2] With this religion, which helped them cope with everyday living in oppressive, brutal conditions, they were able to survive for centuries. Without it they possibly would have become at best a surface, shallow, and superficial people relegated to the status of a footnote in history. Thus, the black church became a combination of its situation, which it left in Africa, and the situation it found in America, began on these shores as a response to the social need of survival and liberation.

The evolution of the black church continued as a response to social needs as The Emancipation Proclamation and the Civil War released several million former slaves from White supervision and direct authority over their morals and family life.

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[1] Gayraud Wilmore, "Black Religious Traditions," (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1998), 287.

[2] Wilmore, "Black Religious Traditions," 288.

During slavery, the family was usually gathered together around the mother on the plantation while the father was a visitor without any legal or recognized status in family relations. He might disappear as the result of being sold or because of his arbitrary or whimsical inclinations. There was no stability or what is known today as the traditional, nuclear family.[3] Thus there was a need for a new communal life and ways made for the Negro to be integrated into new or existing communities that had been created by blacks who had been free prior to the Civil War. The black church in response to this need, became according to Frazier, an agent of social control that undertook to censure unconventional and immoral sexual behavior. The black church now, in this new context, functioned to lift or elevate its people in order to enable them to operate in this new social environment.[4] During this post Civil War period, the black church began to foster economic cooperation among blacks by pooling their resources and buying land, constructing church buildings, and creating benevolent mutual aid societies to meet crisis of life such as sickness and death. From these, the black church, particularly in the North became involved in extra-worship activities as its concern and attention ventured beyond mere survival to racial advancement. As a result, other economic enterprises evolved such as banks, hotels, grocery stores, newspapers, and real estate firms. The elevationist orientation was primarily found among the black middle class.[5] Added to the effort of economic development by the black church was the support of schools. Many of them initiated Sunday schools. However, the churches through their minsters urged parents to

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[3] E. Franklin Frazier, *The Negro Church in America* (New York, NY: Schocken Books, 1974), 38.

[4] Frazier, *The Negro Church*, 38.

[5] Wilmore, "Black Religious Traditions," 292.

send their children to what ever schools were available.[6] Schools were started with a religious and moral outlook.

During the period of Reconstruction following the Civil War and in this climate or organized social life of the Negro, many blacks also became political leaders in politics. Several of these political leaders were preachers, such as: Henry M. Turner, African Methodist Episcopal Church and active in the Georgia legislature, Bishop James W. Hood, African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, the Internal Revenue Service and the State of North Carolina, and Hiram Revels, a United States Senator from Mississippi.

During this period, black churches grew at astronomical rates as a result of the Great Awakening revival period and the newly freed status of the former slave. As a result, black clergy became consumed by the ecclesiastical duties of their quickly expanding denominations. With this distraction, the secular organizations and activities, which grew out of the black church, although influenced by the church, became autonomous.

Simultaneously, the growing black educated class became anxious for upward mobility and freed themselves of ecclesiastical control and became interested in a new legal, political, and economic motif of liberation and equality. The black church as a result, became bureaucratic and elitist or bourgeois and lost influence to secular elements.

The Civil Rights Movement began to come into focus when blacks gravitated towards assimilation to the white mainstream and denial of black heritage and culture coupled with a withdrawal from political and social involvement in the black community by the churches occurred during the Great Depression of 1929 and the period between World War I and World War II. This was also a period when black sects and cults

[6] Wilmore, "Black Religious Traditions," 44.

viewed negatively as militant or radical y the black church began to emerge. Wilmore, in his Black Religion and Black Radicalism, has called his conservative political and social stance the "de-radicalization of the Black Church."

Beginning in 1955, Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was thrust on the scene in Montgomery, Alabama as the black church again began to lose its holistic influence to secular enterprises and cults. Until then, no one had come forth with a prophetic ministry, which united the spirituality and survival needs of the impoverished masses with the need for equality and liberation of the sophisticated upper and middle black class.[7]

Dr. King and other began to utilize the agency of the black churches in registering voters, recruiting and organizing labor unions, campaigning, intense politicization, and radical strategies of protest on economic issues. The churches became points of mobilization for mass meetings and demonstrations while providing support for civil rights workers from religious and secular groups. Many of the participants in the protest demonstrations came form the church. In addition, the culture of the black church, whether its music or oratory, or its ethic of nonviolence, found its way into and permeated the movement.[8]

Whatever else may be said concerning the Civil Rights Movement or Martin Luther King, Jr., their crowning glory may be Dr. King's genius in wedding together social, political, economic, cultural, and religious elements and making them inseparable

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[7] Wilmore, "Black Religious Traditions," 295.

[8] C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African American Experience* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1990), 212.

from the black church. Thus, the historical black motifs of survival, elevation, and liberation were balanced within the African notion of holistic religion.

One of the major contributions of the Civil Rights movement is that it combined a deep spiritual commitment with expanded social, political, and economic opportunities to produce material gains for the black middle class.[9] However, early in the first decade of the twenty-first century, the values of the Civil Rights movement have either been forgotten and or a generation has grown up in this society that does not know or care about these values. The spirituality of the movement has been replaced by an uncontrollable hunger for prosperity and pleasure. A transient youth culture has evolved that glorifies violence, disdains serious commitments, disrespects and insults its women, and trivializes black culture.

The historic black church in to many instances has denigrated into an unnatural imitation of white conservative religion or has been seduced by hype and anti-intellectual emotionalism.[10] As a result, the black church finds itself rapidly losing influence among youth and in contemporary society in the early 2000s.

At its best, the black church has helped the race survive the viciousness of white oppression, elevate the masses and young morally and spiritually, and helped to liberate the race from second-class citizenship, economic exploitation, and inequality. However, it has allowed its historic, true external mission and contribution to American society as well as its internal mission to itself and black culture to be compromised. This comes at a time when the current status of blacks in America may be described as an alarming struggle to survive.

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[9] Wilmore, "Black Religious Traditions," 297.

[10] Wilmore, "Black Religious Traditions," 297.

Oppressive structures that legitimize the dehumanization of people have the power to elicit various forms of resentment and protest from those who are the victims of such structures. The lives of the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcolm X and Stokely Carmichael, whose lives are like bookends in the discipline of social theory, witness to this truth. Their lives mark the close of Modernity's Classical Age and as Charles Lemert states,

> The beginning of the second great period in social theory, a period during which social theory itself changed. The greatest irony of the time was the social theories of previously excluded and oppressed people came increasingly to the fore in large part because of the success of some very abstract philosophical doctrines taught in the most bourgeois and philosophical of world cities, Paris.[11]

Three young black revolutionaries responding to structures that had dehumanized African Americans for three centuries ushered in a new paradigm for social theorists. Dr. King responded to the political and social struggle by becoming the embodiment of Mohandas Karamchand Ghandi's principle of nonviolence. Malcolm X, responding partially to Dr. King, but more to the same structures of oppression, delivered the speech, "Ballot or Bullet." Stokely Carmichaael, succeeding King and Malcolm at the tender age of twenty-four, set the world ablaze in 1966 with his interpretation of "Black Power." Jacques Derrida reflecting on this revolutionary period of history writes,

> This was the moment when language invaded the universal problematic, the moment when, in the absence of a center or origin, everything became discourse – provided we can agree on this word – this is to say, a system in which the central signified the original or transcendental signified, is never absolutely present outside a system of differences. The absence of the transcendental signified extends the domain and the play of signification infinitely.[12]

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[11] Charles Lemert, *Social Theory, The Multicultural and Classic Readings* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1999), 14.

[12] Lemert, *Social Theory,* 15.

Carmichael's use and interpretation of "Black Power," according to C.L.R. James peaking in 1967, "makes Stokely a person who is a mortal danger to those who wish to preserve the old way of life in the United States."[13] Carmichael, a philosophy graduate of Howard University, under the banner of "Black Power, "transformed the Civil Rights Movement into a language that would galvanize the minds of black college students. The "Black Power" banner was transcendent. Black Power was Carmichael's battle cry that propelled African Americans to take action against an externally imposed position of shame by redefining beauty. As president of the Student Non-Violent Movement, Carmichael held before African American college students a new identity of selfhood that was to be claimed and lived out in every corridor of society. "We have to as a people gather strength to stand up on our feet and say, 'our noses are broad, our lips are thick, our hair is nappy – we are black and beautiful!"[14] Carmichael used language that sought to give black people the authority to name, claim and proclaim their self-worth and, by so doing, position them to construct their own future while deconstructing self-images that are disempowering.

Stokely's paradigm for change began by addressing the sociology of shame. Stokely saw shame as having its own language and habits that produced a cycle of self-destruction. He states,

> We are so ashamed of ourselves that we watch our brothers and sisters get put out of their houses, put their furniture on the street, and we wait until night time to go and steal what we want. We are so ashamed of ourselves that we're raping, plundering, and murdering each other. We have to build a concept of people-

[13] Lemert, *Social Theory*, 426.

[14] Stokely Carmichael, "Speech to Garfield High School," Seattle, WA, April 19, 1967, accessed October 13, 2016, http//courses.washington.edu/spcmu/Carmichael.com.

> hood where we recognize that we are all the same people, the same brothers and sisters.[15]

Stokely believed that as black people we had the power to birth a new identity through self-change.

Bell Hooks in *Salvation: Black People and Love*, states "Within a culture of domination, shaming others is one way to assert coercive power and dominance."[16] Shaming does not allow for beauty or power outside of the culture of dominance. In our modern culture, without conscientiously naming it, we have used "signifying," or "Playing the dozen" to perpetual shame. When a child misbehaves in public, it is socially acceptable to shame the child until the child conforms to the desired behavior. Bell Hooks further states, "Ironically and sadly many black households where parents are adamantly anti-racists, regimes of discipline and punishment exist that mirror those utilized by white supremacist to subordinate black people."[17] If black people could conceive of self as powerful and as beautiful then, "black parents won't tell us, 'don't drink coffee, because it makes you black. Bite in your lip, cause it's too thick.'"[18] When Carmichael passionately coined "Black Power," it reverberated around the world and centuries of shame begun to thaw. In a sense, those who had been living with shame discovered that they were not alone, they were not ugly and they did have power that was not negotiable.

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[15] Carmichael, "Speech to Garfield High School," accessed October 13, 2016, http//courses.washington.edu/spcmu/Carmichael.com.

[16] Bell Hooks, *Salvation Black People and Love* (New York, NY: Harper Collins, 2001), 82.

[17] Hooks, *Salvation Black People*, 84.

[18] Carmichael, "Speech to Garfield High School," accessed October 13, 2016, http//courses.washington.edu/spcmu/Carmichael.com.

Carmichael's Black Power Movement was in response to injustice. His principles are not only appropriate in the context of the postmodern black urban church that may be struggling to hold on to its history while taking hold of its future. They are fundamental because they have as their point of departure the creation of community. "Only when black people fully develop this sense of community, of themselves, can they begin to deal effectively with the problems of racism in this country. This is what we meant by new consciousness; this is the vital first step."[19] Carmichael's principles were four-fold:

> (a) the recognition by the parties involved of their respective self-interests; (b) the mutual belief that each party stands to benefit in terms of that self-interest from allying with the other or others; (c) the acceptance of the fact that each party has its own independent base of power and does not depend for ultimate decision-making on a force outside itself; and(d) the realization that the coalition deals with specific and identifiable – as opposed to general and vague – goals.[20]

As mentioned previously, the National Urban League's, The State of Black America, 2006, statistics indicate that the blacks were doing relatively worse than whites in each area of their Equality Index with the exception of civic engagement. The pay of black men including those who are college-educated has declined for at least ten years when compared relative to whites. The pay of black women relative to the wages of white women shows similar results. The rate of increase of black elected officials is less now than it was in the 1970s and 1980s. The black struggle for empowerment no longer garners support of sympathy but instead brings resentment. Issues close to the black community such as welfare, affirmative action, and the Voting Rights Act are continue to

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[19] Stokely Carmichael and Charles V. Hamilton, *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation in America* (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 1967), 39.

[20] Carmichael and Hamilton, *Black Power,* 77.

be under attack.[21] In comparison with whites, African American experience much higher mortality and death rates from illness, disease, and homicide. In addition, the black community is experiencing a decline in educational attainment and success related to cultural identity, having lost a positive sense of self-esteem.[22]

The time is right to reclaim the historical holistic ministry of the African American church, which has at its center a comprehensive interrelated and inseparable mission of salvation, liberation, elevation and survival. Historically, only when salvation a social action has been complimentary, has the race been able to survive, elevate morally and spiritually, and free itself from oppression, exploitation, and inequality.

God has demonstrated in the past the capacity to deliver a people from life threatening circumstances to a place where they were better able to live out their destiny. The challenge is to claim spiritual inheritance, which has been debased and devalued by a generation who has not been taught the truth about their identity, the road they have traveled, or how they arrived at their current sorry plight if we are to be spared total secularization, annihilation, and the extinction of our race and culture.

The purpose of this Doctor of Ministry project is to help the black community survive, be elevated, and liberated. The title of the project is "Connecting the Church to the Community Through Advocacy and Social justice." This model reconnects social justice with the spiritual and cultural foundations when woven together in a balanced holistic relationship has always been the force behind successful black religious and political development.

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[21] Homer U. Ashby Jr., *Our Home is Over Jordan* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2003), 2.

[22] Ashby Jr., *Our Home is Over Jordan,* 8.

CHAPTER FIVE

THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

Dr. James Cone challenged the black church in 1984 to reexamine the definitions of freedom as well as the methods used to attain it if liberation for the poor was to be achieved. Traditional theological models have not reflected the black experience of faith, poverty, and oppression. In addition, there has been what Cone and others consider to be a denial of the theological value of black history and culture as well as a failure to address issues of social prejudice and discrimination.

The theological task is to create a system that begins the journey toward liberation for the black church and the black community. By beginning with the theological question, "What does God have to do with the black church and the black community?" Asking this question puts our relationship with God and our neighbor at the center. Specifically, "is God concerned about the 'donut hole' that now exists as urban blight? What has this to do with God? On the other hand, more importantly, what has God to do with this?

According to James Harris, black liberation theology is the best available model for the black church if it is to be more than just a clone of white evangelicalism. In addition, these post-modern, post-civil rights times require a holistic focus that is concerned with the total person as well as with the social structure in which we find

ourselves.[1] The specific doctrine to be viewed through the lens of liberation provides the foundation for connecting the church to the community through advocacy and social justice.

Dr. Cone writes, "It is a fact: in almost every scene of the Old Testament drama of salvation, the poor are defended against the rich, the weak against the strong. Yahweh is the God of the oppressed whose revelation is identical with their liberation from bondage."[2] Dr. James Cone, author of *God of the Oppressed*, states, "Theology is subjective about God, a speech that tells us far more about the hopes and dreams of certain God-talkers than about the Maker and Creator of heaven and earth."[3] Our task is to seek to know the will of God and to know who we are because of God's redemptive work on our behalf through Jesus the Christ and now at work in us though we are surrounded by urban blight. God talk may motivate but cannot redeem unless it is supported by faith in God, in neighbor and in self.

This project connecting the church to the community through social justice and advocacy takes into consideration the statement of Dr. James Cone, author of *Liberation, a Black Theology of Liberation*. "There can be no theology of the gospel which does not arise from an oppressed community. This is so because God in Christ has revealed himself as a God who righteousness is inseparable from the weak and helpless in human society."[4] This project attempts to connect the church to the community to put the human

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[1] James H. Harris, "*Black Church and Black Theology: Theory and Practice*," in *Black Theology: A Documentary History, Vol. 2: 1980-1992*, ed. James H. Cone and Gayraud S. Wilmore (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993), 92.

[2] James Cone, *God of the Oppressed* (New York, NY: Seabury, 1975), 70.

[3] Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, 41.

[4] James Cone, *Black Liberation Theology* (New York, NY: J.B. Lippincott Company, 1970), 24.

hurt, the cries of the community, the depravation of the soul and societal decay at the center of the black church ministry and at the center of Wesley Temple A.M.E. Zion Church's ministry in particular.

Black theology happens when there is an intersection between black church life and black community life. While it is true that many African Americans have moved into the arena of prosperity that was once only for European Americans, the majority of African Americans are in the clutches of poverty. God forbid that the short time of prosperity should continue to isolate from the masses of black people who expect the black church to give voice to the voiceless and hope to the hopeless.

The black community, though surrounded by devastating conditions, has gifts to bring, contributions to make, that are redemptive and that speak of God's activity in the world. Dr. Cone states,

> The task of Black theology then is to analyze the nature of the gospel of Jesus Christ in the light of oppressed black people so they will see the gospel as inseparable from their humiliated condition, bestowing on them the necessary power to break the chains of oppression. This means that it is a theology o f and for the black community, seeking to interpret the religious dimensions of the forces of liberation in that community.[5]

Without an ongoing relationship between the black church and the black community, there can be no relevant theology in the black church. The rehearsal of ritual and liturgy void of the substance and power of the intersection of church and community is impotent. Should this happen, the words of Rev. Hollins will cease to be a warning that encourages proactive change and will become a prophecy fulfilled.

Black theology acknowledges that the black church cannot live in a vacuum; rather, it must be connected and relevant to the life of the black community. The

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[5] Cone, *Black Liberation Theology*, 23.

relationship created between the black church and the black community has to have a centering point. Black theology places Jesus at the center. Dr. Cone states, "Black Theology is Christian Theology because it centers on Jesus Christ. There can be no Christian theology which does not have Jesus Christ as its point of departure."[6] Dr. Cone further states,

> Unlike white theology which tends to make the Christ-event an abstract, intellectual idea, Black Theology believes that the black community itself is precisely where Christ is at work. The Christ- event in twentieth-century America is a black-event, that is, an event of liberation taking place in the black community in which black people recognize that it is incumbent upon them to throw off the chains of white America, and why Black Theology may be the only possible theology in our time.[7]

This current reality includes the black community as equal partners in the work of ushering in the redemptive work of God. The Creator of all that is good and righteous will birth a new reality for those black churches who make room for the least, the lost, and the lonely who find themselves trapped in the donut hole of urban blight. This project will create a lasting connection between the black church and the black community creating a revolutionary stance that seeks to place Christ at the center of black community life. This position ushers the black church into the political, social, economic and spiritual life of the black community as sojourners seeking to right wrongs and to eradicate systemic oppression by joining the voiceless in a crescendo cry for justice that leads to self-recovery.

This stance of solidarity requires the church in partnership with each other to welcome the gifts of the black community as necessary for a shared struggle. Dr. Cone states, "In a revolutionary situation there can never be just theology. It is always theology

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[6] Cone, *Black Liberation Theology,* 24.

[7] Cone, *Black Liberation Theology*, 24.

identified with a particular community. It is identified either with those who inflict oppression or with those who are its victims. A theology of the latter is authentic Christian theology, and a theology of the former is a theology of the Antichrist."[8]

Creating a method for redeeming the connection between the black church and the black community life is a way to share with the black community that God too is experiencing the hurt, the pain and the situation that confronts the twenty-first century black church and black community. It further seeks to create anew the identity of both the black church and the black community as being interwoven and indivisible from each other.

> The search for black identity is the search for God, for God's identity is black identity. For Black Theology, this is not pantheism; it is the conviction that the transcendent God who became immanent in Israelite history and incarnate in the man Jesus is also involved in the history of black people, affecting their liberation from white oppressors. This is what Black Theology means for black people who are in search of new ways of talking about God which enhances their understanding of themselves.[9]

The oppression is systemic; whether one has monetary treasures or meager resources, the black church and the black community must wrestle with the infestation of social oppression. To recognize in the face of monetary and materialistic valuables that social oppression exists within the church is overwhelming. Yet, when black churches compete for the meager resources of the other churches and non-profit community organizations to maintain a presence in the urban donut hole of blight, it is a victim of systemic oppression. In communities where there are multiple churches dealing with urban blight, time that should be devoted to faith formation is often, out of necessity, used for maintenance or survival ministry.

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[8] Cone, *Black Liberation Theology*, 25.

[9] Cone, *Black Liberation Theology*, 40.

The small black church is a sojourner on the road that leads to self-recovery. It is incumbent upon the black church to abstain from trusting in the white churches to save it. Rather, the faithful response to current reality is to trust God to include the small black churches in God's plan of salvation of the world. This is indeed the same warning that John Wesley gave to the Methodists of the eighteenth century church in reference to the spiritual disciplines. We are to practice the spiritual disciplines, not to put our trust in them.

We wrestle as an act of seeking liberation that can birth a new reality steeped in our faith in God. "Fellowship with God is the beginning and the end of human liberation. The liberated person is the one who encounters God in faith."[10] The development of this project for redeeming the connection between the black church ministry and the black community is a God-sized challenge to move into the liberated life. It calls for the church universal to traverse economic, social, class and race lines to usher in the righteousness of God. The black church must handle scripture in such a way that it is not only a witness to the word of God, but it is also relevant to the black community. God requires the Christian family, as a righteous risk of faith, to work for redeeming the connection between black church and black community. This theological paradigmatic shift invites the church to propel sanctuary worship into sanctuary living. To take the word, the gospel message of Sunday morning worship into the streets of Monday morning living is the fruit of redemption. Holy living with neighbor that reflects one's care for another's well-being is sanctuary living. This theological ethos mandates the sharing of a loaf of bread and the offering of the "Bread of Life," Jesus.

[10] Cone, *God of the Oppressed,* 141.

Naming and working against systems that elicit resentment, anger, grief and estrangements as the only authentic response to injustice is the result of God's activity in the human drama. Rehearsing the human drama of expressing resentment, anger, grief and estrangement in the presence of systemic injustice that produces poverty and crime-infested cultures becomes the source of doing theology that informs the work of the church.

Writing on the sources and norms of black theology, Dr. James Cone uses John Macquarrie's Principles of Christian Theology and Paul Tillich's Systematic Theology to explain sources and norms. In systematic theology, "The sources are the 'formative factors' that determine the character of a given theology, and the norm is 'the criterion to which the sources. . . must be subjected.'"[11] Dr. James Cone further explains, "the sources are the relevant data for the theological task, while the norm determines how the data will be used."[12] Dr. Cone lists six sources of black theology:

1. Black Experience. There can be no Black Theology which does not take seriously the black experience—a life of humiliation and suffering. This must be the point of departure of all God-talk which seeks to be black talk. . .

2. Black History. Black history refers to the way black people were brought to this land and the way they have been treated in this land. This is not to say that only the American white man participated in the institution of slavery. But there was something unique about American slavery, namely, the white man's attempt to define black people as nonpeople. . .

3. Black Culture. The concept of black culture is closely related to black experience and black history. We could say that the black experience is what the black man feels when he tries to carve out an existence in dehumanized white society. It is black "soul," the pain and the joy of reacting to whiteness and affirming blackness . . . Black culture consists of the creative forms of expression as one reflects on the history, endures the pain, and experiences the joy. . .

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[11] Cone, *Black Liberation Theology*, 50.

[12] Cone, *Black Liberation Theology*, 51.

4. Revelation. Revelation is what Yahweh did in the event of the Exodus; it is Yahweh tearing down old orders and establishing new ones. Throughout the entire history of Israel, to know God is to know what he is doing in human history on behalf of the oppressed of the land.

5. Scripture. Black Theology is kerygmatic theology. That is, it is theology which takes seriously the importance of Scripture in theological discourse. There can be no theology of the Christian gospel which does not take into account the biblical witness.

6. Tradition. Tradition refers to the theological reflection of the church upon the nature of Christianity from the time of the early church to the present day. It is impossible for any student of Christianity to ignore tradition because the New Testament itself is a result of it.[13]

The community is the source that births relevant theology for the black church. The entire ministry of the black church is subject to the black community. The life of Jesus, the One who came to bind up the broken hearted, is the criterion for ministry in the black community. Relevant theology happens when the source and the criterion are interdependent. Dr. Cone states, "The norm of all God-talk which seeks to be black-talk is the manifestation of Jesus as the Black Christ who provides the necessary soul for black liberation. . . Black Theology refuses to accept any norm which does not focus on Jesus Christ, because he is the essence of the Christian gospel."[14] Our theological task is to position ourselves so that God may choose to be at work in us, defining and refining a ministry of liberation that moves beyond injustice and despair within the black church and the black community. "When God is revealed in history as freedom for us, he is disclosed as the God of hope."[15] Shared hope holds the promise of recovered dreams that were lost.

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[13] Cone, *Black Liberation Theology*, 54-69.

[14] Cone, *Black Liberation Theology* 80.

[15] Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, 140.

In Deuteronomy 6:6-9, Israel is instructed to diligently teach the words of the Lord to their children. The consequence of failing to take heed to this command destines our children to become mired in a never-ending cycle of repetitive historical mistakes. The blessing for African Americans is in knowing and passing on the truths of the Word of God in order to build congregation, family, and community. To equip the next generation with the spiritual and cultural lessons that we have learned will fortify, elevate, and liberate them from all forms of oppression. These lessons will allow us to equip and build a stronger future for our church, family, and community.

In facing a generation that was not around during the powerful years of the Civil Rights Movement and have no knowledge or respect of the struggle that brought them many of the opportunities that they enjoy today, it appears that we have not taught our children about the history, struggle, and liberation of their past and present. Israel was being prepared to come into their inheritance, enter the Promised Land, and receive the blessing of the Lord. As preparation before entering, self-identity, being able to cherish and hold claim to one's personhood brings the freedom of giving one's self away for the sake of the community. Additionally, as preparation before entering, they were warned by Moses first of all about the sin of forgetfulness. "When thou hast eaten, and art full, then beware lest thou forget the Lord thy God" (Deut. 6:11,12). Prosperity, opportunities not won, and gain without struggle were likely to breed forgetfulness. This has been one of the subtle perils in our African American experience as we become full and fall into the sleep of forgetfulness. Our greatest danger exists when we have fewer needs than previously.[16]

[16] Marvin McMickle, *Preaching to the Black Middle Class: Words of Challenge, Words of Hope* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 2000), 55.

Therefore, we are warned to remember and to teach. Israel, which had a longer period in slavery than existed in America did not avoid teaching about their slavery, but also added that they were blessed to live in the Land of Promise. We need to deal with the changes God has brought about in our lives, the blessed as well as the shameful events in our story in order to build up the next generation. We must teach I once was, but now.[17]

In addition, there is a need to challenge our children to have expectations higher than ours, to accomplish more than we have in the past, and to go further than the previous generation. This looking back at the past in order to go forward is intended to challenge and encourage them to be a success in whatever area. Deuteronomy the sixth chapter also made it clear that "if it had not been for the Lord," Israel could not have made it. In elevating the next generation, it is imperative not to brag about the things we have accomplished, but to acknowledge the miraculous deliverance of God. We need to teach the children where we were, even if it was shameful. Then move to where we are now. The fact that there has been a great change and we have come a long way since our days in bondage, thus expect the next generation to aspire to greater heights.

The conceptions of the church as the body of Christ and as the house or dwelling of God are closely connected and the imagery sometimes flows together.[18] This doctrine indicates that Believers grow up, and increase in the knowledge of God. For the sake of this up-building God equips the church with various gifts and powers that He places at its

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[17] McMickle, *Preaching to the Black Middle Class*, 55.

[18] Herman Ridderbos, *Paul: An Outline of His Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1975), 431.

disposal as well as various kinds of ministries that further its up-building.[19] However, many of the congregants that we see, which were previously unchurched come to us carrying the negative consequences of various forms of oppression. Theologically, these symptoms relate to forgiveness and shame.

Romans 8:26 states: "Likewise the Spirit also helpeth our infirmities: for we know not what we should pray for as we ought: but the Spirit itself maketh intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered." Dr. Andrew Sung Park talks about several types of shame that victims experience and that are manifested in humiliation and failure.[20]

These are destructive and require intervention, support, and treatment. The primary biblical event that speaks to the shame of humiliation is the crucifixion of Jesus. The shame of the sinned-against and the shame of the sinner are distinguished in the Bible as humiliation and grace. The cross of Jesus, as well as lynching in the United States and more contemporary and subtle oppressive policies are a public reminder of our subjugation to the powers that be.[21]

In our day, as in Jesus' crucifixion, victims of oppression and violence were often mistrusted, jeered, scape-goated, distanced, and blamed for their victimization. The shame of humiliation is the natural response of victims to oppression and injustice. Victims often withdrew into themselves or gave in to the pressure of humiliating shame, destroy their self-dignity, and blame themselves which drove them to worthlessness,

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[19] Ridderbos, *Paul*, 432.

[20] Andrew Sung Park, *From Hurt to Healing: A Theology of the Wounded* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2004), 37.

[21] Park, *From Hurt to Healing*, 39.

defectiveness, and dishonor.[22] The collective humiliation of slavery and poverty continues to the cumulative dehumanization that continues in the form of discrimination. Victims respond with self-destructive behavior and lifestyles. They feel like life is flawed and may settle for anything in order to feel loved or accepted. The doctrine of forgiveness is part and parcel of the mentoring process.

Particularly when those whose lives have been devalued in the shame-based culture, the need to overcome negative stereotypes that they have internalized becomes a major task. In Mark 6:3, Matthew 13:55, and Luke 4:22 we find the put down and rejection of Jesus by his own community: "Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary, the brother of James and Joseph, and of Juda, and Simon? And are not his sisters here with us?" They were offended at him. The community generally has a low view of each other when it has a low view of itself. When it believes and internalizes its negative self--perceptions, the next step is to put down all of the members who individually make up the community. These negative attitudes have to be overcome in order to build up the people and the community.

[22] Park, *From Hurt to Healing*, 40.

CHAPTER SIX

PROJECT ANALYSIS

This research project emerged with a focus on the Wesley Temple African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, the homeless residents of the Haven of Rest, Harvest Homes and the community in which Wesley Temple Church is located.

The Haven of Rest and Harvest Homes is a men's and women's shelter located on the same street as Wesley Temple Church. The Haven of Rest is the men shelter and Harvest Homes is the women's shelter. Over the years, Wesley Temple Church has had a relationship with the residents of both homes. For many years, Wesley Temple had a feeding ministry that fed the residents of the homes once a week. While Wesley Temple meant well what we discovered was that our feeding program was providing a service that the shelter our neighbors were already providing. The feeding program was not an entrance point for our church and it did not connect those we were serving to our church.

The goal of this project was to develop a ministry model that would connect Wesley Temple to the community. To develop a model that help the members of the church not to see our neighbors living in the shelter or our other neighbors many who live in poverty as projects but as our neighbors. The project was designed with our neighbors in mind. Over the years Wesley Temple has been guilty of the sin of not loving your neighbor. The project is based on the themes of advocacy and social justice. Many of the people that use to frequent our feeding program either had mental health issues or

dealing with criminal issues. Many of them needed assistance applying for social security and other government benefits.

The project model allowed me to combine my training as an attorney, educator and pastor to lead the congregation in meeting the needs of the least of these. The aim of this project has been to create a model of church and community engagement that will connect the Wesley Temple African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church to the local community in which the church sits. Over the years many evangelism and outreach efforts had not produce any real connection between the local church and the local community. Evangelism certainly has many different facets. The most commonly thought of facet is that of "proclamation." It has seemed for years the focus has solely been on proclamation of the gospel and memorizing techniques and tactics on how best to make a verbal presentation. The aim of this project is to demonstrate an equal need for the facet of "demonstration." The gospel must be demonstrated before it can be proclaimed. One clearly sees this in the gospel story itself. An angel was not sent to tell of God's love, God himself came and "demonstrated His love toward us" by dying on a Cross. The act of demonstration precedes proclamation.

Demonstration precedes proclamation, but it cannot end there. It must continue on toward a point of proclamation. In an effort to prepare the congregation for the type of evangelism and outreach that would create and develop the kind of connection that allows the church to be a resource and a partner for the community we reviewed Bishop Robert Schnase's book *The Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations*. We spent time reading and discussing the chapters on radical hospitality, passionate worship, intentional faith development and risk taking missions. During our time reading and discussing the

book it became clear that we had to make major adjustments in our attitude, behavior and practices.

We discovered that we had some pre-project preparations to make. We wanted the community to know that we really wanted them to visit our church. We wanted to communicate in every way that we really cared about them and that we wanted to be a voice for them. We wanted them to know that they were not alone and that when they are struggling we would be a part of their support team. Preparing leaders, members and volunteers for what to say and how to respond to the needs of the community and to those who make up the community was a key area for improvement. Volunteers needed be aware and looking for windows of opportunities when a person's soul may be opened to hear the truth that they are experiencing right before them. Volunteers, greeters and ushers many times were the first point of contact for persons encountering our church.

Volunteers and ministry workers were encouraged to allow their first encounter with members of the community to be a getting to know you session and not a come to Jesus moment. They were reminded that it was more important that the members of the community learn that we care about them before teaching them church history. The first encounter is an opportunity to learn about their family, the joys of their lives and maybe about the hurts and habits. It is advised that if more is shared the volunteer starts with their story of how Christ changed their life and the difference He made in their life. The volunteer should not get discouraged if the conversation does not go further than their initial response to the inquiry.

A key in implementing this improvement was being sure that serving volunteers did not rush to judgment upon meeting a member of the community who have decided to

be a part of the project or to visit our church. All volunteers were reminded that the focus must be on the members of the community and not the members of the church. The focus was to be on Christian principles and not Christian preference. Volunteers were encouraged when the opportunity presented itself to share their conversion story. The story should include what their life was like "before Christ" and what their life is like "after Christ" has been accepted as their Savior. The story should discuss "how" the volunteer accepted Christ and include an invitation for the hearer to accept Christ as well. The volunteer would be encouraged to have a short version of their story that is thirty-seconds long and if the "hearer" seems receptive they could then elaborate.

It was important ensuring that every community service volunteer had a well thought out thirty-second version of their story to share. The second step would be at the outreach or evangelism event the leader reminds and encourages all volunteers to look for opportunities to encourage participating community members and to share with them that they are important to God and to our church. The leader will remind them that a key opportunity will be when someone asks, "Why are you doing this?" The next step will be for the volunteer to give a short response such as, "We believe Jesus loves you and we want to show you that love today!"

Sharing one's story is an effective means of communicating the gospel. It is hard for a hearer to argue with an individual's experience. One can easily argue about facts, figures, and dates, but personal experiences are more difficult to resolve. The sharing of a personal story is in line with famous evangelists of the New Testament such as the Samaritan woman at the well in John the fourth chapter and the blind man in John the ninth chapter. The Samaritan woman invited the entire town to come and meet a man

who changed her life and their response was: Many of the Samaritans from that town believed in him because of the woman's testimony, "He told me everything I ever did." So when the Samaritans came to him, they urged him to stay with them, and he stayed two days and because of his words many more became Believers. They said to the woman, "We no longer believe just because of what you said; now we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this man really is the Savior of the world.

The blind man in John the ninth chapter shared his story by stating: "Whether he is a sinner or not, I don't know. One thing I do know. I was blind but now I see!" Both individuals shared their stories with those who were seeking. There was no memorized formula or even a single scripture used in their "presentation," it was just a heartfelt story because they "first landed on the belief that the God they know is worth knowing! They have cultivated a heart posture that says, 'Well, of course everyone I know would want this type of relationship with God! I'm absolutely sure you'd all love what I'm experiencing here" (Jn. 9:30). This is the belief that is carried into the community service projects and the belief held when sharing their personal story.

The project and Wesley Temple has identified three groups to partner with. The groups the church primarily works with are two local elementary schools, the city council representative for the area, and the Haven of Rest a social services non-profit. Currently, there is not a primary point of contact person from the church who works exclusively with each organization. The recommendation is that the church identifies one person to spearhead all involvement with each group. This would require three high-capacity volunteers who understand the vision and the mission of the church as well as their organization to know how and when the church can best serve each group. This point

person would potentially sit on the board of the organization and have regular involvement with key staff as “keeping visible” is a key component of building community partnerships. The point person would be a bridge between the church and the other organization. This person, because of their involvement with both groups, would be able to quickly identify ways the church can engage the people of the community.

The point person would also be the sole source of communication from the church to that group. This would eliminate much of the confusion coming from multiple people and multiple small groups contacting each organization looking for service opportunities. The point person would have already identified key objectives and opportunities within their community organization which only strengthens and deepens the relationship with the church because they are meeting a legitimate need with a lasting impact. The point person provides a needed voice within each organization to exercise the influence the church is gaining on ways to positively shape the local community.

The church needs to incorporate the evangelism efforts and the outreach plan for the year on the master calendar. The preaching calendar is placed on the master calendar. The project should not be seen as an event but should continue for the year. Certain recurring or annual service projects are already placed on the master calendar, but the entire strategy should be listed.

The clearly calendared projects will allow all leaders to see what the main objectives are for each month and quarter. The incorporation of these events will aid in preventing the scheduling of overlapping events that would compete for volunteers. The desire is that the mission comes first and nothing would distract from the overall mission of the church. The key question in this research was whether strategies and approaches

rooted in the Gospel and social justice could be used to engage the unchurched in the community where Wesley Temple Church sits.

The problem that was addressed in the research was past evangelism projects and outreach efforts did not have an impact on the growth of Wesley Temple numerically and did not create meaningful connections and relationships with the community and the Wesley Temple Church. This project was based on a qualitative approach using surveys and small group meetings and interviews in hopes of shedding light on the central problem in this research. A couple of different research instruments were used to help gather the information and process the findings. A survey was developed. The hypotheses guided the writing of the open-ended questions that were used in the following different contexts. The first context members of the church took a pre-test. Surveys were given to individuals who would take them home and complete them on their own and email them back. An attempt was made to create two separate groups among the members and to meet with core members and then a second group made up of newer members to the body.

The second instrument used was a survey given to members of the community who do not attend Wesley Temple Church. These surveys were fundamental to obtaining a balanced view from the church and the community. Another form of data collection came through on-site observations where face-to-face interactions helped to gain insight into the church and community relationship. Notes were made based on a subjective perspective. Notes were made during staff meetings, strategic planning meetings, and worship and outreach services. One-on-one interviews with staff, community members

and lay leadership were conducted. Attendees of the congregations were spoken to as well.

Personal observations and experiences as a pastor of church that was able to engage its community contributed to the presuppositions and influenced the formulation of the surveys and the project. Having spent three years in Columbus, Ohio pastoring, I acquired a set of skills in cultural analysis and strategic church planning that have helped me be missional in my worldview and ministry practices. In addition, I spent seven years serving in Trinidad and Tobago with much of my time and work focusing on evangelism and outreach.

One of the means of assuring good data collection was to meet with diverse sectors of people in each congregation. To start with, other ministers, missionaries and Christian education workers. It seemed that the ministry leaders must be the strongest carriers of the desired outreach ethos for the church to effectively "catch it." The project questioned how well the ministry leaders knew, embraced, and transferred their ethos. Many times, theory does not always get translated into the day-to-day routine of the church members; therefore, core members were met with separate from the ministry leaders. An in-depth look at the membership was a valuable part of determining how deep the outreach ethos ran once it was spoken and demonstrated by the pastor and ministry leaders. Transferring this call from the ministry team to all of the church members required saturation and total congruence in the outreach DNA of spiritual community.

A part of this process included the attempt to meet with newer members of the church and members who have been members for many years and knows the history.

Each membership group had a different makeup. The first group was designed for core members that had been members of the church for a year or longer. The following paragraph describes the criteria used for selecting the "core" members:

Core Members Group: I would like to interview some of the church's "go to members" in a discussion format. These would be non-paid members of the Wesley Temple. I will be centering our discussion on the following questions…

1. How has Wesley Temple shaped how you live out your faith?
2. What are Wesley Temple greatest contributions to the community?
3. In just a few words how would you describe Wesley Temple to someone far from God?
4. What are Wesley Temple greatest strengths/weaknesses?

As the pastor, I carefully choose the members that best represented the church in this study. My goal was to find the members that best lived and emulated the ethos of the church. The second group contained members of the church who had been in the church for less than one year. It was a test to see how closely those who were new in the church aligned with the ethos and vision of the core members. I arranged the group along the following criteria.

New Member Focus Groups: (new members to Wesley Temple within the past twelve month). Interviews were conducted following Sunday's morning worship time or after Bible study. The following are the questions that were asked.

1. How did you first learn about the Wesley Temple?
2. Did you attend another church in the area before coming to the Wesley Temple?
3. What are Wesley Temple greatest strengths/weaknesses?

The groups provided the greatest look into the church from a non-paid personnel view. It gave a "grass roots view" and helped show how deep and wide the outreach ethos ran in the congregation. It was also the most difficult to complete because of the difficulties arranging the logistical challenges and scheduling issues with the participants.

Other data collections for consideration in this project were five years of the church statistical data forms that provided information about the church budget and church growth. The statistical data revealed how effective the church was at accomplishing its evangelism and outreach goals through statistics of the church. I reviewed copies of their annual budgets as sources of financial funding, prioritization comparison for two years prior to my becoming the pastor.

Several hours of interviews were recorded and over forty-two surveys and questionnaires. A review of the interviews and the surveys revealed that the members of the church were aware of the plight of the members of the community who live near and around the church. They were aware that many of the residents around and near the church lived in one of three shelters near the church. Some of them stayed in the nearby men's shelter the Haven of Rest. Others lived in the nearby shelter Harvest Homes a shelter for women and children. Yet others lived in another shelter called Access another shelter for women and children. There are also other residents who live in houses and apartments.

It was also revealed that the members of the church were more than willing to give financial donations and other donations that would help and assist the homeless or poor residents of the community. However, not many of the church members were willing to do hands on and face to face ministry. While there are some members who are

limited by age and disability as it relates to ministering to the community there are others who are limited by desire and others fear. There are members who are not able to participate in church outreach because of illness and disability. There are other members who talk about community service they do with their fraternities and sororities but will not make themselves available for evangelism and outreach at the church. The community service that many of them are engage in does not require them to have contact with the least of these.

The surveys and interviews also revealed that many members of the community does not know much about Wesley Temple. Many of them do not know of any ministries or outreach efforts that are offered by Wesley Temple. They do not know the pastor, the members or see the church as a community partner. Many have never been in the church and others have been in the church but have never been in the sanctuary. Based on their knowledge and limited contact with the church if the church was to closed their doors it is possible that the community would not miss it or realize that the church closed.

This research has been enlightening and fulfilling. The changes that Wesley Temple had to make and will have to make are deep and may be painful for many. The adjustments that Wesley Temple have to make are multifaceted and involve layers of change. These decisions determine their future. While many churches appear to refuse to decide to change, Wesley Temple must step up and make the bold move to be the body of Christ in the community.

It appears that churches are in socially hostile environments in western society, which were once inclusive and hospitable to Christian thought and the established church. Western society used to be open to weaving Christian beliefs into the fabric of

the community; now communities are exclusive and hostile as they separate their values and social acceptance from the church. North America is seeing a new cultural matrix emerge from Christendom into post-Christendom. Making the necessary adjustments into a more experiential and contextualized outreach model is vital to the church's future.

Of all the means for gathering data and researching each body, the survey was the most useful and consistent. It provided the greatest help. This instrument was most often used and provided useful information. On the community survey, eight questions were asked. The answers to these questions provide the framework for the analysis and conclusion. The stories, interviews, quotations, antidotal observations, and other data collected during this research support the survey's revelations.

One of the goals of this project is to have Wesley Temple Church move from predicting rain to building arks. Every time we talk about the problems of the community and say that things are getting worse we are only predicting rain. As pastor and people we spent time asking ourselves how do we help families in the community who need help putting food on the table? How do we help children academically and help to close the achievement gap? How do we make sure that our evangelism and outreach efforts are relevant and meeting the needs of the community? How do we help people who are victims of mass incarceration and implicit bias? After asking ourselves the tough questions we begin to work on creating outreach strategies that would connect our church to the community.

Church outreach and evangelism has come increasingly into vogue among certain churches. This seems to be due to the entrepreneurial spirit of churches that focus of intentional and effective evangelism and outreach. There is a priority and commitment

among evangelistic churches to connect people to God and to the church. Developing Believers into a spiritual community with the intention of mobilizing congregants back into their cultures is the goal of churches that focuses on outreach and evangelism. The hypothesis that Wesley Temple can use social justice and advocacy as an effort to engage the unchurched in their post-Christian communities was not difficult to establish. Fighting with and for the poor has become viral among some churches that provide outreach in their communities.

The greater challenge was not in establishing the hypothesis but in defining it. Evangelism and outreach has a plethora of expressions. Regardless of the definitions of evangelism and outreach the model must be effective in connecting the community, the church and the people that you are trying to reach in a meaningful way. Sixty percent of surveys from church members said they believed that Wesley Temple was committed to serving the community and ministering to the poor. However, less than twenty percent of the members of the community that was surveyed believe that the serving the community and ministering to the poor was a priority of the church.

Reaching the community and connecting the church to the community should be a priority locally and globally in churches. Understanding what, how, and when a church is reaching and connecting with the community may be the most difficult element of unpacking this hypothesis because evangelism and outreach in the twenty-first century is multifaceted and slippery. The strategy of church development and the methodology therein leaves a lot of room for discussion around the effective outreach and effective evangelism.

Not all evangelism and outreach strategies are equal for all churches. Some are more effective than others. Some are only focused on proclamation and others are focused on meeting tangible needs. During the project Wesley Temple was focused on proclamation but also had an intentional focus on meeting the tangible needs of the people of the community. The project director believed that proclamation without fellowship and the showing of general concerned for the community would not produce the results that the church needs and desire. Between 60 and 65% of those surveyed strongly agreed that their church had an intentional plan for connecting Wesley Temple to the community. The membership buy-in for creating relevant ministry and outreach projects that shows God love to the community was excellent. They believed that their ministries before the project was inward focus and were not engaging the community. After the teaching, small group sessions and reflections many of the members attitudes, and behavior changed. They had more care and concern for the lost and the least of these.

The leaders discussed that in order to engage the community and to grow the church, the church needed an "intentional plan" in place. Ninety-two percent of the surveyed people near the end of the project strongly agreed or agreed that Wesley Temple had a plan in place to grow the church while meeting the needs of the community. When talking to the lay leaders they said that having a written intentional plan would keep the mission and the work of the church before them. There were times when the pastor and members wondered how many opportunities had been missed to grow the church because the church did not have an intentional plan in place. Acknowledging that the church always knew that outreach and evangelism was always important but the church was not

always intentional. Churches that are intentional create a climate to innovate or reproduce disciples with efficiency and success.

Wesley Temple is a part of a connectional church. There are many projects that are initiated by the denomination Christian Education Department of the denominational missionary department. However, local church outreach and evangelism is a pivotal part of the church growth and disciple making. While working to promote the denomination agenda the local church must have a local agenda that focuses on intentional faith development. Intentional faith development includes all the ministries, classes and outreach opportunities that take place after the Sunday morning worship experience. They include the Bible studies, the small group classes, the connection luncheon and so many other opportunities to connect the people to God, the church and to one another.

During the project Wesley Temple started having every Sunday "Connections Luncheon." Every second Sunday, the pastor and the first lady invited the new members, guest and other members to a restaurant for dinner after church. The purpose of the luncheon is for the new members to get to know the pastor, members and each other. The luncheon is somewhat like an icebreaker. We make every effort not to talk about church business. At the second Sunday dinner, the discussion is focused on life experiences. We also talk about life before we were members of the body of Christ. We make every attempt to help our new members and their families to see that we really want them at Wesley Temple and that they do not have to do life alone. There are some Sunday's when new members ask if their children who did not attend morning worship can join the dinner. We always say yes. It is another opportunity to show radical hospitality.

Another ministry that we use to connect the unchurch and others to Wesley Temple is our weekly lunch and learn Bible study. Every Tuesday at 12:00 noon we have Bible study with a full lunch. People spend their lunch hour eating, fellowshipping and studying the Bible at our church. There is no charge and there is always plenty of food for everyone. At our weekly lunch and learn Bible study we discuss current events and what's happening in the community. A part of the discussion is always centered around how do we show love to our neighbor. The Bible study format was designed in a way that allows everyone to participate without being uncomfortable.

This project explored racism and discrimination on the job, unfair hiring and firing practices, unequal pay for equal work, discrimination and promotion practices, discrimination in housing and acquiring home loans. All of these issues are common placed among the poor and oppressed, especially African Americans. Questions that we explored included: Why is it important to get a good education? What is the role of historical black colleges and universities today? What does Brown vs. Board of Education stand for? What is mass incarceration and implicit bias? We explored issues that reduce the quality of life for the poor and the oppressed and how to eliminate them.

During the project I shared with leaders and members of the congregation each week what was happening downtown at the Summit County Courthouse. I reminded them each week that the thirteen county judges are all white. I told them that out of thirty plus criminal prosecutors only one is black. Most of the police officers and the lawyers that are appointed to represent poor black and brown people were white. For many of the members and leaders they were shocked to learn the information. I taught sessions and sermons on the importance of being advocates for the poor. I encouraged members to

show up as support for the poor who are often over charged. What I did week after week was shed light on the poverty industry.

The poverty industry includes many courts, police department and welfare agencies. The poverty industry makes it a crime for being poor. Poor people are charged with crimes and are assessed fees that they cannot afford to pay. When they do not pay the fines and fees more cost is attached to their bill. They are threatened with jail time, license forfeiture and community service work also known as free labor when they cannot pay the bill. I encouraged the members to work in small groups to create strategies that will allow us to communicate to our community that we will fight for and with them. The first strategy was to offer prayer. Another strategy was to assist people in understanding their charges and encouraging them not quickly agree to plea to charges they were not guilty of. One of the things that we considered as an option for the future is to create a weekly legal clinic to assist poor people with many legal matters. Legal matters could be criminal matters.

Another aim of the project was intended to explain what strategies are most effective in connecting the church to the community. One of the outreach efforts and strategies that we use to use was a weekly hot meal program. We discovered that program was no longer effective because many other churches and organizations were serving food to the residents of the church community in a park and out of cars and vans near the church. We learned that we had to be more intentional and more creative.

Over the course of the project we had to continue to make adjustments. We learn that we had to become intentional in all that we do. We had to make adjustments in our worship service. We had to make sure that out worship experience was relevant and

relational. We had to make sure that the music was a mixture of hymns and contemporary music. We worked to make sure that our nursery was updated and that families and young adults could use our service and our building was welcoming. We had to consider branding and marketing issues. If a church has already established the name or "brand" in the community, then evangelism and outreach is easier. Unfortunate, our church is mostly known for being the oldest African American church in the city. Prior to the start of the project we were not known as the church that fight for the poor. We may have been known as the church for the middle class or the wealthy. We may not have been the first church the average person would consider visiting on a Sunday.

Prior to the start of the project, pastor and members involved in the project read, reviewed and discussed *The Five Practices of a Fruitful Congregation* by Bishop Robert Schnase. The leadership team worked on marketing and advertising the activities that were a part of the study. They advertised the studies, the dinners and other activities. During the project, the congregation was invited to participate in a six-week Bible study on "Connecting the Church to the Community Through Advocacy and Social Justice" based on the teaching material that was developed for the project. I taught lessons based on Psalms 82:1-8. The lesson was taught three times a week for six weeks. I taught the Sunday school class, I preached the Sunday message and I taught the lesson at Bible study each Tuesday.

In addition to the teachings and discussions we added three new ministry projects. We changed our Bible study to a "lunch and learn" Bible study. We provided a meal each Tuesday during the Bible study to encourage more members of the church and members of the community to attend and participate in the Bible study. In addition, we

started what we call "Connection Luncheon." Every second Sunday the pastor and first lady took the new members, guest and other church members to dinner at no cost to the participants. The connection luncheon to connect with new members and guests and to reconnect with each other. It was our honest attempt to communicate to the community we really want you to be a part of Wesley Temple in an attempt to communicate that you do not have to do life alone.

The members who participated were excited about the project. There were five project facilitators who shared in leading, encouraging and marketing. The five facilitators were individuals who had worked together on church projects in the past. They worked well together. On June 21, 2016 a meeting with the leadership team of the Wesley Temple A.M.E. Zion Church was held to discuss the doctor of ministry project and the benefits for the church participating in the project. On August 15, 2016 the pre-test was administered to the members and leaders of Wesley Temple A.M.E. Zion Church. On August 29, 2016 a meeting was held with the contextual associates and the leaders of the Christian Education Department, the Missionary Department and the Evangelism Department. On September 2, 2016 a community dinner to introduce the project to key community leaders and members of the community was held. At the community dinner we distributed the community surveys. September 11, 18, 25 and October 2, 2016 sermon series and church school lessons on justice, advocacy and loving thy neighbor were taught. On September 13, 20, 27 and October 4, 2016 Bible study series on justice, advocacy and loving thy neighbor were taught.

Throughout the project the lead facilitator and the context associates meet to evaluate as the project continued. They met weekly to pray, plan reflect and implement

the project. The team monitored the process, promoted all studies and events and encourage participation from church members and the community. The facilitators were able to keep the participants motivated. There was not a budget for the project. Therefore, Pastor and Mrs. Tyler paid for the monthly connection luncheon and the weekly food for the lunch and learn.

The weekly Bible study was specifically designed for church leaders and members to re-assess the church's current relationship and connection to the community. We also addressed the challenges that prevent real relationships between the church and the community. It was my hope that the Bible study would encourage the congregation to desire and create relevant and relational ministries for the community.

One of the elements of the outreach movement that is increasing across America is the taking ministry outside of the four walls of the church. As a part of the project we started a Bible study across town. It is held in a conference room at an office building. It meets each Tuesday evening. Two of our neighboring churches left their building and one is having church at a local school near the community and another moved into a school building in the suburbs. Each of the churches have experience church growth and lower overhead cost. Growing churches prove that the unmentioned boundaries of facilities and zip codes are irrelevant hindrances to the gospel's work. The agile nature of the growing church allows it to be more about movement than constricting structures or the institutional security built around facilities. Growing churches find great freedom to create and express worship in multiple contexts and venues and to conduct ministries outside the confines of a single church building. Being free from facilities allows

churches to have freedom to venture into multiple locations and give presence into the community without being tied to one place.

A willingness to embrace a relevant and relational outreach and evangelism is necessary for the twenty-first century. Individuals and families are not looking to join dead, boring and stale churches. They are looking for churches that offer hope and not confirm despair. Throughout the project the church leadership and the members showed a willingness to make the necessary changes in attitudes and behaviors to be attractive to the community in our attempt to connect the community to the church. Many attempts were made to make sure that Wesley Temple Church became a vibrant and fruitful congregation.

One of the things that became obvious during the project is that we must also make adjustments to our church budget. Our church budget must reflect our desire to grow the church and to connect the church to the community. It has been our history to provide food baskets to families in need for Christmas and Thanksgiving. However, we did not provide any tangible help to persons who were not members of our church. We did not help pay utility bills, help with medicine, help with rent or to show in any meaningful way that we loved our neighbors. Although our church has what is called the ministry of kindness that was only to help members of the church that had need. Sizeable monies designated to church growth and outreach are a sure sign of a church's ethos and its commitment to church growth.

As mention above Wesley Temple is a member of the African Methodist Episcopal Zion denomination. The denomination creates many projects through the Christian Education Department and the Missionary Department that is geared toward

church growth but the responsibility of church growth rests on the shoulders of the local church. Although the denomination may provide guidance and assistance it is not the job of the denominations or mission boards to grow the local church. As was discussed, what Wesley Temple would look like after the project we acknowledged that we needed to be involved in diverse human need projects locally and globally. We accept the fact that we have a great opportunity to grow our church by being good neighbors. We admitted that we needed to repent of the sin or not loving our neighbor. The work that was created and carried out during the project was strongly supported by the members and the leadership.

During our time of reflection some members communicated that they believed that Wesley Temple Church and other churches was a party of God's strategy to save the world. The scripture that says, "upon this rock I build my church" now means something. The excitement for outreach trickled down to church members from the ministry leaders. During our weekly review of the project members felt that Wesley Temple started to place an emphasis on church growth and being good neighbors. There was little doubt that church growth was pulsing through the veins of the church, staff, members, and gatherings.

The members who participated in the project now have a sense of ownership and commitment to the church community and the community around the church. They feel that they have a responsibility to train, stand with, and support the community where the church sits. One of the ways Wesley Temple sought to have greater connectedness to individuals and families that lived in the community is intentionally setting aside time to pray with and for them. In addition to an intentional prayer ministry it was decided that

we would start a couponing ministry and purchase items that would be given to anyone in the community that needed items that would be in the church's pantry.

In our attempt to connect the church to the community we showed a great sense of responsibility and care for persons from the community that visited or joined our church. We assisted with rent deposits and first month rents for persons whose time was up and they had to leave the shelter near the church. We assisted in providing items for new apartments such as dishes and televisions. We provided rides for individuals who received new jobs but did not get off of work until after the city buses had stop running. We provided rides to job interviews and to other appointments.

Church growth is multifaceted and can be time consuming. Although we are living in the midst of a culture far from God, as a church and community of Believers we have decided not to let this reality paralyze or frighten us. If anything, it motivates us. We have decided to follow Jesus and following Jesus means seeking that, which was lost. During and after this project we desire desperately to be part of and identify with the culture in which the lost live. We desire to come alongside them and assure them that they do not have to do life alone. We will no longer be isolated from the community where our church sit. Instead we will love our neighbors. We will be their advocates and fight with and for them.

Our time together during this project has taught us how to build bridges across cultural barriers in hopes of engaging people through ministry. We have decided that God's principles are more important than our preference. Although the interpretation will not change in the message the presentation and application will so that we can reach the masses. We are working to be sure that the ministries and message are relevant to the

culture yet rooted in sound, biblical theology that communicates to the heart of the target people consequently, linking the message to their lives. The ultimate aim of Wesley Temple is to call people to a changed life in Christ and to living on His mission.

Wesley Temple is committed to intentionally reaching out to and interface with a culture different from our own. This is called engagement, which Jesus modeled in John 1:14 (also Phil 2:5-8). Paul practiced engagement on his missionary journeys as well (Acts 17). To engage a people through outreach is to know, speak the language of, and live among a people far from God. It is the intentional act of building bridges rather than barriers of isolation between Believers and people outside a relationship with Jesus.

Participating in the project has caused Wesley Temple to resist the urge to isolate from the community. Wesley Temple wants outreach and ministry to be more than safe gatherings, assimilation into the church and meetings on Sunday. We want the ministry of the church to be about involvement in the community throughout the week assimilating believers into the lost community for the sake of the gospel.

The project reminded us that, "church" happens beyond the four walls where the people far from God live. Sunday mornings at Wesley Temple will be an advertisement to what we do throughout the week. The service will advertise that we love God with all of our heart and all of our mind and that we love the people in the community like we love ourselves. As an engaging church moving forward Wesley Temple will involve itself fully in the lives of the community. During and after the project Wesley Temple members "regularly engage in spiritual conversations with the unchurched or people far from God." As a result of the project and our efforts during the project Wesley Temple received eight new members. Almost fifty percent of the regular Sunday morning

attendees attend Bible study and the connection dinner that is held monthly. We experience passionate worship and show radical hospitality. Wesley Temple is beginning to live as missionaries within their own culture engaging people.

During the project we learned that Dr. Ruby Payne was right when she suggest that there is a hidden language in the community of those who live in poverty. There is also hidden language in the middle class. Out church just as many other organizations operate according to the standards and the language of the middle class. There were times when some church members were not comfortable with the language and behavior of the members of the community that visited and or joined our church. As pastor I had to remind some members that we must meet the people where they are. We had to build relationships with people before we try to correct their behavior.

Throughout the project I had to remind the people that we had to focus more on the people that we were trying to reach and less time on the people we were trying to keep. We had to trade our preference in for principle. We learned that church growth takes place when we offer relevant and relational ministry. The social justice teaching, preaching and assisting our neighbors led to new life at Wesley Temple. It also lead to excitement and eight new members.

APPENDIX A

CORE MEMBERS GROUP SURVEY

CORE MEMBERS GROUP SURVEY

1. How has Wesley Temple shaped how you live out your faith?

2. What are Wesley Temple greatest contributions to the community?

3. In just a few words how would you describe Wesley Temple to someone far from God?

4. What are Wesley Temple greatest strengths/weaknesses?

APPENDIX B

NEW MEMBERS GROUP SURVEY

NEW MEMBERS GROUP SURVEY

1. How did you first learn about Wesley Temple?

2. Did you attend another church in the area before coming to Wesley Temple?

3. What are Wesley Temple greatest strength/weaknesses?

4. In just a few words please describe your experience at Wesley Temple.

APPENDIX C

COMMUNITY SURVEY

COMMUNITY SURVEY

1. Have you attended a worship service at Wesley Temple in the last six months?

2. If you answered yes to question one, please describe your experience.

3. Have you participated in the Wesley Temple's hot mean program before?

4. If you answer yes to question three, please describe your experience?

5. What programs or services can Wesley Temple offer to help the members of the community?

6. What are your thoughts when you hear or think of Wesley Temple?

7. Have you ever been invited to attend Wesley Temple by a member of Wesley Temple?

8. If you have never attended an event at Wesley Temple why not?

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